

Reprobation – A Just Decree of God

Author: C. VanSteenselen

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Introduction

The powerful preacher Spurgeon said, “This is the doctrine that we preach—if a man is saved, all the honor is to be given to Christ—but if a man is lost, all the blame is to be laid upon himself! You will find all true theology summed up in these two short sentences—salvation is all of the Grace of God—damnation is all of the will of man.”¹ Though most church members could agree that salvation is God’s grace, many are troubled about damnation of man in hell.² This is even more the case when this results from God’s decree of reprobation. The question is how a loving God can allow people to suffer eternally if He has chosen their destiny. This doctrine is difficult and results in sincere questions that need an answer. A confession that gives a pastoral answer is the Canons of Dordt. Based on this document, it can be argued, God is just in His eternal decree to reject the reprobates eternal life that results in their eternal death on account of their own sins.

¹. C.H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons Volume 41*, vol. 41 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1985), 217.

². J. C. Den Ouden, “De Hel en Gods Liefde,” *Terdege*, July 8, 2009.

The Doctrine of Reprobation

It is necessary to know what the Canons of Dordt teach about reprobation and its Biblical basis. First, it is important to look at the definition of terms related to reprobation. Then will be looked at the reality and origin of mankind being under Gods wrath, the origin of reprobation in eternity and the result of it in time, the cause and reality of eternal punishment, and finally God's purpose of this decree.

Terminology

The Canons of Dordt and the Acta of the National Synod of Dordt of 1618-1619 use various terms that are related to God's eternal decree concerning man's salvation. The first term is "predestination," which comes from the Latin word "praedestinatio."³ The Latin Vulgate uses this term a number of times, for instance, in Romans 8, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [Vulg. praedestinavit]...them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified..." (Rom. 8:29-30). In the original Greek, the word προορίζω is used, which means, "to predetermine, [or] decide beforehand."⁴ Based on this, the delegates to the Synod of Dordt gave a more detailed definition to this term. Theologians of Embden said, "Predestination is the eternal, free, immutable and just decree of God, according by which He has decreet, from the human race...some by His good pleasure to elect unto eternal life, but to leave others in perdition."⁵ At this Synod a similar definition was given by the divines of Drenthe,⁶ and Sibrandus Lubbertus.⁷ Moreover, they argued that the decree of predestination contains two parts: election and reprobation.⁸ Election is that people are chosen to eternal life. Reprobation is that people are not chosen to eternal life. Though the term "reprobation" is used, they often speak of a "passing by." The Dordt divines say, "Others are *passed by* in the eternal decree; whom God...has decreed to *leave* in the common misery...and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion;...And this is the *decree of reprobation*."⁹ In similar manner, the theologians of

³. Wilhelmus À Brakel, *The Christian's reasonable service.*, edited by. Joel R. Beeke, trans by. Bartel Elshout, vol. 1 ([S.l.]: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 212.

⁴. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (New York: Harper & Brothers., 1889), 541.

⁵. Festus Hommius and Sebastianus Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, edited by. J.H. Donner and S.A. Van den Hoorn, trans by. Winandus Schullius, 2004, 399, <http://www.kerkrecht.nl/sites/default/files/Nationale%20Synode%20te%20Dordrecht%201618-1619.pdf>.

⁶. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 684.

⁷. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 607.

⁸. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 293.

⁹. *The Canons of Dordt*, n.d., <https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Canons-of-Dort-with-Intro.pdf> (accessed August 17, 2021), 1.15. Emphasis added.

Utrecht, and the churches of Nassau and Wetteravia speak about a “non-election.”¹⁰ This is not only true for the Dutch divines but also foreign delegates prefer to speak of a “non-election.” For instance, the divines of Great Britain said, “Reprobation, properly called, *non-election* (or non-choosing) is an eternal decree of God, by which He has decreed, according to His free will, not to have mercy over certain persons...to draw them powerfully by Christ out of the misery, and to bring them unfailingly to eternal happiness.”¹¹ On the other hand, Brakel, who was not a delegate to the Synod, though he describes the term by “to be cast away” or “to be fitted to destruction,” prefers to speak about “reprobation.”¹² Taking all this in consideration, it seems to be proper to speak about a non-election or non-choosing when there is dealt with the doctrine of reprobation.

The Common Misery of Man

The doctrine of reprobation needs to be seen in the light of the common state of misery of mankind. If this is not the case, then reprobation and election can be seen as an unjust act of God. This importance is demonstrated in the Canons of Dort in beginning with an article about this reality. It says, “As *all* men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and *are deserving of eternal death*, God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish and delivering them over to condemnation on account of sin.”¹³ In other words, Adam was the head of the covenant of works. At the moment he ate of the forbidden fruit, he broke this covenant and sinned. This caused that the whole human race sinned in him and brought upon themselves the curse of God and the deserving of eternal death. The divines argue that this needs to be taught and understood by everyone. For instance, the Paltic theologians said, “After the heinous fall of the first parents, God would have been allowed to condemn men to eternal fire, even as the angles who had sinned.”¹⁴ In like manner, Lubbertus says, “All man have sinned in Adam, and are guilty of damnation and eternal death. God had the right to condemn all men for their sins. Also, God would not have wronged anyone if He had damned all men for their sins, or had decreed to damn.”¹⁵ This understanding is not only found among the delegates of the synod, but also those of the Westminster Assembly. They argue in their confession,

[Adam and Eve] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to *all* their posterity...Every sin, both original and actual...doth...bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the

¹⁰. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 379, 629.

¹¹. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 349. Emphasis added.

¹². À Brakel, *The Christian’s reasonable service.*, 1:220.

¹³. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.1. Emphasis added.

¹⁴. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 360.

¹⁵. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 606.

wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.¹⁶

In other words, every person is by birth a sinner and deserves God's wrath so that God is not unjust when He would leave all in their misery.

The question, however, is whether this doctrine is Biblical. Paul in the letter to the Romans surely writes that everyone has sinned in Adam, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). A few verses later, Paul defines that this "one man" is Adam (Rom. 5:14). In like manner, David describes that he had original sin from his conception, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). This is not only true for him, but for every person in the world (Rom. 3:22). It shows that the doctrine of original sin is Biblical and applicable for every person. The result is that each person is guilty before God (Rom. 3:19), and therefore, deserves death, "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

The Cause of Reprobation in God's Decree

After understanding man's common misery, the doctrine of reprobation can be discussed. The question is what its source is. There could be two possibilities. The first is that God saw from eternity that some would remain in their sin without repentance, and therefore decided that He would not save them. The second is that God decreed out of His free will that some people would remain in their state of death without taking their sinful actions into consideration. According to the first possibility it seems that man has more freedom in choosing life or death, and it will be his own fault when he will not be elected to life. God will then be righteous that He would condemn some to hell forever. This is the position of the Remonstrants, "God has not decreed, without intervening actual sins, to let the majority of men be excluded from all hope of salvation, by leaving them in the fall...No one is neither rejected from eternal life nor from the means sufficient to eternal life by an absolute preceding decree...unless they misuse [the means] for their destruction."¹⁷ However, this makes God in His decree dependent on man, and He will no longer be sovereign. The result is that God is no longer God because He depends on something outside of Himself. The second possibility that God decreed to leave some in their state of death is His free and sovereign will. This is the view that the Canons of Dort embraces. They argue, "Others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure, *has decreed to leave* in the common misery...and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion."¹⁸ In like manner argue the British divines in the Westminster Confession of Faith the same, "The rest of

¹⁶. Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), VI.3 and VI.6. Emphasis added.

¹⁷. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 120.

¹⁸. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.15. Emphasis added.

mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel *of his own will*...to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.”¹⁹ Brakel would argue along similar lines when he says, “Predestination is an eternal, volitional, and immutable decree of God...to create other men, also concluding them in the state of sin.”²⁰ In other words, the reprobation of man is founded in Gods unchangeable decree and not based on man’s free will to sin. Also, Kersten writes along the same lines in his Reformed Dogmatics, “The cause of reprobation does not lie in any cause outside God; not even in sin; but in Gods absolute sovereignty.”²¹ Similarly, Bavinck argues that even as “faith and good works are not the cause for election, so is sin not the cause for reprobation but only Gods sovereign good pleasure, the decree of reprobation precedes in a sense the decree to allow sin.”²² This demonstrates that all solid Reformed divines say that reprobation is determent only out of God’s sovereign will.

The question is which of these options is based on Scripture. Theologians at the Synod of Dordt referred to various texts. For instance, the divines of South Holland, North Holland and Zeeland refer to the letter to the Romans, “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth...What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (Rom. 9:18,22).²³ In other words, it only comes from Gpd’s will to demonstrate mercy on the one and not on the other. In similar description is found in Ephesians, where is written, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh *all things after the counsel of his own will*” (Eph. 1:11).²⁴ The apostle demonstrates in both cases that every thing that God works and determines is the consequence of the counsel of His will. The North Holland theologians write, “That He leaves some men in the fall and misery, and does not give tot hem the means, which are necessary and sufficient for salvation, that He does wholly according to the counsel of His will.”²⁵ This demonstrates that the only cause for the reprobation is God’s free and sovereign will and good pleasure. However, it is important to notice that the cause for the decree of reprobation is not the same as the cause for a reprobate’s eternal damnation. This will be discussed later.

¹⁹. Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition*, III.7. Emphasis added.

²⁰. À Brakel, *The Christian’s reasonable service.*, 1:214.

²¹. G.H. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 1 (Utrecht: De Banier, 1966), 189.

²². H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (ComputerBijbel, n.d.), 576, <https://theologienet.nl/bestanden/Dogmatiek-van-Bavinck.pdf>.

²³. Some of these theologians would also refer to Prov. 16:4; Matt. 11:25-26, 20:15; Eph. 1:5,9; Rom. 9:11,16; Jude 4.

²⁴. Emphasis added.

²⁵. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 639.

The Result of Reprobation in Time

The next question is the consequence of God's eternal decree in time. Kersten says that this is first the fall of man, which applies both to the elect and the reprobate, but for the latter also a spiritual blinding, hardening of heart and disobedience.²⁶ From this, there are two things that can be argued for. First, God leaves the reprobate in their state of misery and permits them to continue in sin, and second, there will be no true conversion in the reprobate. This can either be the lack of means for salvation, like the preaching of the gospel, or the reprobate will not truly repent and believe the gospel.

In the first place, God leaves the non-elect to themselves so that they continue in their sin. The Dortd divines describe how man by nature is in being indulged in his sin. They say, "[Man] revolting from God...by his own free will...became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."²⁷ Furthermore, they argue that this will continue if God does not give grace. As this is the case with the non-elect, the Canons of Dortd say, "[God] leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own *wickedness and obduracy*,"²⁸ and argue in another article, "God...has decreed to leave in the common misery...[and is] permitting them in His just judgment to follow their own ways."²⁹ This demonstrates the state of man by nature and his willful persistence as a result of his own sinful desires and the withholding of God's grace because of His eternal decree of reprobation.

In the second place, God will give no grace to the reprobate to have true repentance and faith, which are both needed for salvation. This can either be that God prevents that the means of grace are given to them, or that the non-elect rejects willfully the means of grace. Concerning the first, the divines of Dortd argue that for faith and repentance, God's messengers need to proclaim the gospel. At the same time, they say that these preachers are only sent to places and at the times that God wills. They write, "That men may be caused to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings *to whom He will* and at *what time He pleases*."³⁰ The Scriptural support for this can be found in Romans, where is written, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Rom. 10:14-15a). This demonstrates that only those who receive the gospel can be saved, and that this is dependent on God's sending. Implicitly, this means that not each person in the world will hear the gospel and is in this way depraved of the means of grace. At the same

²⁶. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1:191.

²⁷. *The Canons of Dort*, 3.1.

²⁸. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.6. Emphasis added.

²⁹. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.15.

³⁰. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.3. Emphasis added.

time, they say that natural revelation about God is insufficient for salvation, “So far is this understanding of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion.”³¹ In other words, the consequence of God’s sovereign decree is that He withholds the gospel to certain people, which results in that they will remain in their state of sin and misery. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the fault of this lies at man’s side. At creation, God has revealed Himself to Adam, who is the forefather of mankind. Parents have the duty to teach their children in the knowledge of God. However, throughout the generations, some parents did not teach their children or taught them incorrectly. The result is that the generations following have either no knowledge of God or a distorted knowledge of Him. The fault lies, therefore, not in God but with mankind if there is no longer special revelation among the nations. That natural revelation is not enough for salvation, can be found at the beginning of Romans, “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them....so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God.” (Rom. 1:19-21). In other words, there is some natural knowledge that there is a God. However, by nature no one will truly seek after God. At the same time, this knowledge is sufficient to condemn the reprobate for his sin. A second way that results of God’s decree is that the reprobate will reject the means of salvation. The Canons of Dort describe this as follows, “God...has decreed...not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion.”³² In like manner, Westminster Confession describes this as a “withholding of His mercy.”³³ The manner in which this happens is twofold. The reprobate either does not use the means, which are at his disposal, or he rejects the offer of grace in the reading or preaching of the Word. In other words, he willfully rejects God’s way of salvation. In the Acta, this is more clearly defined, “God has determined...not to give [the reprobate] the means necessary for faith and repentance, and for salvation itself.”³⁴ Moreover, the Dutch divines mention that the fault ultimately lies at man’s side in not considering God’s Word, or rejecting His Word purposefully,

The fault lies in [the reprobate]; some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life; others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore, their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes, and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the Word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit.³⁵

In similar manner, the Acta demonstrate that it is his personal choice to remain an

³¹. *The Canons of Dort*, 3.4.

³². *The Canons of Dort*, 1.15.

³³. Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition*, WCF 3.7.

³⁴. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 373.

³⁵. *The Canons of Dort*, 3.9.

unbeliever, “The not-predestinated perishes by a self-willed unbelieving, which is not forced.”³⁶ The reality of this, is demonstrated at various places in Scripture. One instance is the parable of the sower where there are different kind of hearers (Matt. 13). Another one is that God foretells Isaiah how people will respond to his preaching (Isa. 6:9-10). This rejection, as Jesus says, is a result of not being elected, or in other words, who have not been given to the Son by the Father, “As thou [Father] hast given him [Jesus] power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him” (John 17:2). When this text is negated, it can be said that those who were not given to Jesus Christ, the reprobate, will not receive eternal life. And they will not come to Jesus Christ for salvation as a result of not being given to Christ (John 6: 64-65). In conclusion, there is Scriptural evidence that the reprobates will either receive no means for salvation or reject them.

The Cause of Eternal Punishment

The ultimate destination for the reprobate is eternal death in hell. However, the question is what the cause is for eternal punishment. There would be two possibilities. The first one is that God decreed the reprobate to eternal death on the basis of His free will and good pleasure. In this case, the cause is God’s decree. However, Brakel argues, “God did not create one human being to happiness and another to condemnation.”³⁷ In other words, God’s purpose in creating man was not that one person would be elect to eternal happiness and the other to eternal condemnation. This means that the cause for eternal punishment lies not in God’s decree. The second source for the eternal death can be the sins and rejection of salvation by the reprobate. In this case, God leaves the sinner to himself, the reprobate sins voluntarily and declines to repent and believe, which results in eternal damnation due to his sin and iniquity. This is the one that the Canons of Dordt argue for, “Others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God...[decreed] to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their *unbelief*, but also for all their *other sins*.”³⁸ In other words, though God made an eternal decree to not-choose certain people to eternal life, only their unbelief and transgressions will be the cause for their eternal punishment. In regard to their sins, they say that this is both the original as well as actual sin, “[Their] sins, both original as well as actual sins, and unbelief, are the true cause why God hath decreed to inflict eternal punishments of body and soul, and indeed also does in time.”³⁹ In like manner, Kersten argues that God did not directly decree to place the reprobate under damnation, but that it is to glorify His power and wrath when He condemns the sinner for his own sins.⁴⁰ In like manner, Brakel

³⁶. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 351.

³⁷. À Brakel, *The Christian’s reasonable service.*, 1:215.

³⁸. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.15. Emphasis added.

³⁹. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 373.

⁴⁰. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1:173, “Niet de verdoemenis als zodanig heeft God bestemd in de predestinatie, noch de zonde als zonde is Zijn lust; het Gode welgevallig en door Hem geogde einde is de verheerlijking van Zijn toorn en macht in de verdoemenis der goddelozen om hun eigen zonden.”

writes, “To accomplish that objective [to magnify His justice] He [God] decreed to create men, to permit them to sin volitionally, and to justly damn them for their sins.”⁴¹ In conclusion, there is a difference between God’s decree of reprobation and the cause for his eternal punishment. The former is based on God’s free and sovereign good pleasure, while the latter is caused by the sin and unbelief of the reprobate.

The Biblical foundation can be found in various texts. The Dutch professors present at the Synod, referred to a number of different texts. One is that in the epistle to the Thessalonians, “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:11-12), and another in letter of Jude, “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).⁴² Other theologians refer to the result of unbelief to John’s gospel, “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).⁴³ These texts demonstrate that the cause of eternal damnation is both sin and unbelief of man.

The Purpose of Eternal Damnation

Moreover, it can be asked what Gods ultimate purpose is to allow the not-elect people to sin and thereby to punish them eternally. Two main purposes can be given. The first is to glorify Himself, and the second, to show His just justice and wrath.

In the first place, God will glorify Himself in the eternal punishment of the wicked. Though this is not directly mentioned in the Canons of Dordt, the Acta show that some divines argue that one of the purposes of reprobation is God’s glory. For instance, the divines of North Holland said, “The purpose of this Godly will [to leave people in their misery] is to demonstrate *the glory* and righteousness of God.”⁴⁴ In later centuries, Kersten argues even that this is the ultimate purpose, “The rejection [of the reprobate] is *for God’s glory*...He hath condemned the reprobate according to His sovereign good pleasure.”⁴⁵ In like manner, Bavinck says, “Election and reprobation...are a means *for the glory of God*, which is the final end, and therefore the deepest ground of all things.”⁴⁶ The divines refer to a number of texts to support their view. For

⁴¹. À Brakel, *The Christian’s reasonable service.*, 1:215.

⁴². Other references are Rom. 9:18, Rom 11:7-8, 1 Pet. 2:8, 2 Thess. 1:8.

⁴³. Other texts are John 3:36; Mark 16:16; Rom. 2:8-9, 9:22.

⁴⁴. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 639. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1:173. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 585. Emphasis added.

instance, the theologians of North Holland point to Romans, “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Rom. 9:17). They also refer to a statement in Proverbs, “The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4).⁴⁷ However, in the latter text seems to be no relation with the destruction of the wicked and God’s glory. Moreover, Rev. Kersten refer to another prooftext in Romans which says that God’s power will be made known in the destruction of the vessels of wrath (Rom. 9:22). Nonetheless, the prooftexts mentioned are a weak Scriptural foundation that reprobation is for God’s glory. A better prooftext is found in Revelation, where it states, “Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore” (Rev. 19:1-2). The glory of God is not so much in the condemnation itself, but in that He has judged according to truth.

The second purpose that God condemns the wicked is to demonstrate His justice and wrath. The Canons of Dordt say, “[God is] permitting [the reprobate] in His just judgment to follow their own ways, at last, *for the declaration of His justice.*”⁴⁸ In like manner, the Acta mentions, “And that unto this purpose, that, as He showed glory of His mercy in the elect the glory of his mercy, so He manifests in these [reprobate] the glory of His justice, by punishing sin.”⁴⁹ Brakel goes even a step further that in arguing that God first determined the purpose, and then decreed the various means, “[God] first decreed the purpose: the magnification of His grace and *justice.* For this purpose, God decreed the means to accomplish this objective: the creation of man and his conclusion in sin...The apostle [Paul] emphatically states God’s objective: to manifest His wrath as well as the riches of His glory.”⁵⁰ In other words, God purposed to demonstrate both His grace in saving a people to life and His justice in not electing a people, with the result that the reprobate remain in their sin and by this are condemned to an eternal death.

For this, a strong Scriptural foundation can be found. Both the divines of Dordt and Brakel refer to the epistle of Paul to the Romans, “What if God, willing *to shew his wrath*, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (Rom. 9:22).⁵¹ This shows that God’s purpose in destroying the wicked is to demonstrate His righteousness and justice for their sins and iniquity.

⁴⁷. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 639. Note that in the Acta is referred to Prov. 15:4, but this seems to be a typing mistake.

⁴⁸. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.15. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 372.

⁵⁰. À Brakel, *The Christian’s reasonable service.*, 1:214–215. Emphasis added.

⁵¹. Emphasis added.

Pastoral Application

Reprobation is of great weight when its eternal consequences are considered. Therefore, it should be dealt with in utmost care.⁵² A number of important pastoral applications should be made in regard to this doctrine.

Avoidance of Searching in God's Hidden Will

In the first place, a person should not examine the doctrine of election and reprobation in a curious or unbiblical manner. This might give him doubt about God's willingness to be merciful to sinners. Also, it can give a believer darkness in his soul. Voetius writes in *The Spiritual Desertions* that examining the doctrine of reprobation can bring people into lethargy.⁵³ The Canons of Dordt give a similar warning when they say, "[People are] not curiously to pry into the severity and justice of God's judgments displayed to others, to whom this grace is not given."⁵⁴ In like manner, the Paltic theologians argue, "It behooves us not to explore those mysteries, why God has elected this one and rejected the other, and it behooves us not to find out the things concerning God's hidden will, but we should remain by the will as it is revealed in the Word."⁵⁵ In other words, to know God's will, one should not pry into the hidden will of God, like the decree of reprobation, but study God's revealed will as it is found in Scripture.

Understanding the Difference Reprobation and Damnation

In the second place, one should understand the difference between the cause of God's decree of reprobation and the cause of eternal damnation. The first one is because God's free and sovereign good pleasure; the latter is due to the reprobate's sin and unbelief. The Paltic divines argue, "It shall be taught that we even in this life only to some extent understand that God for the rejection of many men, may in no way be accused from injustice. For, first of all, God does not condemn anyone except for his sins. Therefore, He has *not decreed anyone to condemn*, save for sins."⁵⁶ The parishioner should understand and be told that the only reason why someone would enter into eternal darkness is for his own sins. This is therefore a just judgment.

Despair is Unnecessary

In the third place, the church member should not despair when they hear about the doctrine of reprobation. This is even more true for those who honestly seek the LORD and desire to be saved. The reason is that God did not only decree the end, reprobation, but also the means

⁵². Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 361.

⁵³. Gisbertus Voetius, *De Geestelijke Verlatigen* (Middelburg: Stichting de Gihonbron, 2014), 8, <https://theologienet.nl/bestanden/Voetsius-Hoornbeek-troost-onderwijs-in-verlatigen.pdf>.

⁵⁴. *The Canons of Dort*, 3.7.

⁵⁵. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 361.

⁵⁶. Hommius and Dammanius, *Acta of Handelingen des Nationale Synode te Dordrecht 1618-1619*, 361. Emphasis added.

to it. In other words, the reprobation will not use the means of salvation of use it in a wrong manner. Therefore, the pastor can encourage seekers to diligently use the means as this could be a sign that they might be elected. The Canons of Dort say,

Those [with faith but] not as yet strongly felt, and who nevertheless make use of the means which God has appointed for working these graces in us, ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation...but diligently to persevere in the use of means...Much less cause to be terrified by the doctrine of reprobation have they who, though they seriously desire to be turned to God, to please Him only...since a merciful God has promised that He will not quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed.⁵⁷

In other words, if people use the means honestly, they may be encouraged that this is the way in which the LORD works grace in the hearts. More so, if there were no election, they would never have sought God, as no one by nature seeks God (Rom. 3:11). Therefore, those that are seeking Him may be moved by the Holy Spirit and may find eternal life. However, those who despise the means should rightfully be fearful for this doctrine.

⁵⁷. *The Canons of Dort*, 1.16.

Conclusion

The Canons of Dordt deal pastorally with the weighty topic of reprobation. Though they use the term “reprobation,” at the same time they speak about a “passing by” of the reprobate and a “leaving” the person in the common misery of all men. Other theologians, for instance those of Great Britain, prefer to speak of a “non-election.” The Canons rightfully begin with the common misery of all mankind. This is found in Romans 5 (Rom. 5:12). It demonstrates that it is only of grace if God draws some out of this misery and of justice to leave others in this state. Moreover, the origin of reprobation is not, as the Remonstrants would argue, that God foresaw that certain people would sin and, therefore, He condemned them, but it came from God’s sovereign will. Paul confirm this by saying that God shows mercy to whom he will and hardens whom He will (Rom. 9:18,22). It is an eternal, volitional, and immutable decree of God, because He cannot depend on anything of man. The result of this decree in time is that the reprobate will not or not rightly use the means of grace. It is possible that he has no means at his disposal, or he rejects to use them. In other words, the reprobate will continue in sin and reject the offer of the gospel. It has to be said that man does this freely and willingly, without any force from God’s side. This is also the cause of his eternal damnation. Moreover, this decree of reprobation has a purpose as well. Some argue that the eternal punishment of the reprobate is to glorify God. This, however, has little Scriptural basis. The second purpose is that God will demonstrate His justice and wrath. This is the reason that is provided by the Canons of Dordt and can be found in Romans (Rom. 9:22). Nonetheless, this doctrine should be applied to the congregation in a careful and pastoral manner. First, the pastor should encourage them not to pry into the hidden will of God or in an unbiblical manner. This could cause despair and darkness. Second, he should show the difference between the cause of reprobation, which is God’s free will, and the cause of damnation, which is man’s sin and unbelief. Third, he should encourage those who heartily seek God and use the means that they must not despair. The reason is that the reprobate will not use the means or use them in a wrong manner. However, those who desire wholeheartedly to turn from sin unto God, may be encouraged that God will not turn such seekers away. In conclusion, God is sovereign in His eternal decree to leave some in the common misery, with the result that they continue in their sins and reject the offer of grace, so that God will justly condemn them forever for their sin and unbelief.

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