**God’s eternal decree of unconditional election**

Text: Ephesians 1:4-6

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**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 7:6-11; Ephesians 1:1-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 204, 115, 533, 440, 180

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#2) Articles 5-11

**Theme:** Election is a work of God’s electing grace in predestination according to the purpose

of His will for spiritual blessings in Christ to the praise of His glorious grace.

**Proposition:** Glorify God and receive lively comfort: God alone chooses who will be saved.

**Introduction**

As I noted last week the name “Canons of Dort” sounds a little strange today. The word ‘canon’ refers, not to a large gun firing metal balls, but to a body of rules, principles or standards. ‘Dort’ is a shortened form of the name of the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands where a church synod was held between 1618-19. They met during 154 sessions to consider the views of the followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who had been a gifted student of Theodore Beza, John Calvin’s successor in Geneva. These followers of Arminius were called the ‘Remonstrants’ and the doctrine they believed is now called ‘Arminianism’. Arminianism is a system of belief that attempts to explain the relationship between God’s sovereignty and mankind’s free will, especially in relation to salvation. While Calvinism emphasises the sovereignty of God, Arminianism emphasises the responsibility of man.

The Canons of Dort contain what we now know as the ‘five points of Calvinism. These are often expressed in the acronym TULIP: **T**otal depravity; **U**nconditional election; **L**imited atonement; **I**rresistible grace; **P**erseverance of the saints. The five ‘heads’ of the Canons of Dort are actually ordered U.L.T.I.P. Today we focus on Articles 5-11 which focus God’s eternal decree of unconditional election. This is the ‘U’ of TULIP.

The text for our sermon this afternoon is: “*Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved*” (Eph 1:4-6). From this text we’ll be able to answer these key questions which the Synod of Dort wrestled with just over 400 years ago:

1. Who ultimately decides who will be saved?
2. When does this decision take place?
3. Why is this decision made?
4. **Chosen by God in Christ (v4)**

Why do some believe in Christ and are saved, whilst others continue in sin and unbelief? There is a clear division made in the Word of God between those who have eternal life and those who do not. This is the distinction between the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares. It is the distinction revealed in John 3:36: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*”.

It is evident in life that some people show forth fruits of saving faith whilst others do not. The greatest question that the Synod of Dort wrestled with was: “Who ultimately makes the choice as to who will be saved? God or man?”

The clear and plain answer from Scripture is unequivocally: God decides, not man. Ephesians 1:4 reveals this truth: *v4 “even as* ***He******chose*** *us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him”.* Just as ethnic Israel was chosen by God to be His treasured possession from out of all the peoples on the face of the earth (Deut 7:6) so the ‘new Israel’; the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29) are individual chosen by God in Christ. The verb translated ‘chose’ means ‘to select, to pick out from’. God’s choice is made solely by Him, “*according to the purpose of His will*” (v5).

In Reformed theology, this divine saving choice is termed “God’s eternal Decree” the subject of Article 1.6 of the Canons of Dort. “*According to this decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, no matter how hard they may be, and inclines them to believe; those not elected, however, He leaves in their own wickedness and hardness by a just judgement.*” The basis of the choice to save is **solely and exclusively** upon God’s will. Jesus spoke of God’s electing grace when He said: "*You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain*” (John 15:16a). When Paul and Barnabas boldly proclaimed the gospel to the gentiles at Pisidian Antioch, Luke records in the book of Acts that: “*When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were* ***appointed*** *to eternal life believed*” (Acts 13:48).

God ultimately makes the choice of who will be saved, yet as we saw last week, He is pleased to bring people to faith through the preaching of His Word (Canons of Dort 1:3; Romans 10:14-15). Individual men, women and children like us are then faced with a choice either to ‘*receive Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith*’ (CoD 1:4) or to reject Him in unbelief. The cause and guilt of unbelief is not in God, but in us (CoD 1:5). The Canons of Dort helpfully describe God’s eternal decree as profound and merciful (1:6).

The question to ask a person who has heard you proclaim the gospel is then ‘will you come to Christ?’. It is not our business to determine whether a person is elect, but to be faithful in proclaiming the good news, knowing that God’s decree of unconditional election was made long, long ago – which brings us to our second point:

1. **Predestined through Christ (v5)**

When do you decide what to buy at the supermarket? Perhaps you have a shopping list on your fridge, or even a spreadsheet on your computer and you know exactly what you’ll purchase before you get to the shelves. The Word of God uses a very particular word to reveal when God has chosen the people that He will save. “*He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself*”. The Greek word translated ‘predestined’ means to “decide from the beginning or beforehand, predestine; set apart from the beginning or beforehand”.

God sovereignly predetermines all things as Ephesians 1:11 expresses: *“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*”. God has ordered and controls all things before they occur. This includes every event, every action, every living cell, every atom. He is truly almighty. The creator of space and time who is bound by neither. He is eternal.

God’s absolute predetermination of events includes his having decided beforehand that His Son would be sent to die that those He had decided before would be saved could be saved. "*For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!*" (Luke 22:22). “*This Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death*” (Acts 2:23)

The Synod of Dort affirmed that there is only one decree of election which covers all time, including the historical period covered by the Old and New Testaments (Art 1:8). Jacobus Arminius and his followers taught that God looks ahead in time to see what men will decide and then choses them accordingly. This was an attempt to reconcile the absolute authority of God and the responsibility of mankind, but it resulted in a false doctrine which undermined the sovereignty of God and was opposed to Scripture. The Canons of Dort reflect Scripture when they state in Article 1:9 that election is not based on God looking ahead in time so that He can then figure out what to do based on human responses to the gospel. “*This election is not based on foreseen faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality of disposition, as a cause or condition in man required for being chosen*”.

Have you ever forgotten to buy something at the supermarket? Or else got to the aisle and realised don’t have shopping list? Have you ever come home with wrong item (little hands at work)? Or got to the till and not had enough money in the account? We make mistakes when and with what we choose to buy items. God never makes mistakes with those souls He has chosen to purchase through Christ. He has pre-determined who He will purchase and the ‘currency’ of that transaction: the precious blood of His Son, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Graciously blessed in Christ**

In the aftermath of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake the goods in supermarkets were thrown off the shelves these products became soiled goods, broken jars, crushed packages which nobody would purchase. This is like the natural state of people like us after the fall. God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God has chosen the weak things to shame the strong things. God has chosen the base/despised things of the world. God has chosen the things that are not to bring to nothing things that are {1 Corinthians 1:27-30(summarised)} – therefore no man should boast before God.

Brothers and sisters, friends, we are all ‘damaged goods’. "*There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one*." (Rom 3:10-12).

There is no good reason for God to choose us and plenty of good reasons for Him not to. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*” (Eph 2:8). God’s decision to save is not based on any human quality or ability; not founded on obedience; not founded on holiness, or other “good” thing He finds. Divine election does not depend on who a person is or what they have done.

The Apostle Paul illustrates this reality with the case of two brothers Jacob and Esau. Before they were born, their mother Rebecca was told ‘The older will serve the younger”. For this unique circumstance in covenant history, God unveiled His secret will of unconditional election so that His election of one brother and not the other was revealed saying “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*” (Rom 9:13). For Jacob his election took place **before** he had done anything good or bad (Rom 9:11).

To our human minds this election can seem unfair because God’s choice occurs ‘*before the foundation of the world*’. The Scriptures answer the question about God’s justice as Paul quotes Moses: "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*" (Rom 9:15). Election then “*depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*” (Rom 9:16). It is unconditional. The ‘U’ of Tulip

The Canons of Dort express it this way in Article 1:10: “*The cause of this gracious election is solely the good pleasure of God. This good pleasure does not consist in this, that out of all possible conditions God chose certain qualities or actions of men as a condition for salvation, but in this, that out of the common mass of sinners he adopted certain persons to be his own possession*”.

Our brokenness was purchased by Christ who was broken for us. The driving purpose of predestination is solely God’s praise: It’s primarily about Him, not us: “*to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved*”. That the most holy name of God may be praised: ‘*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counsellor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen’* (Romans 11:33-36).

God’s eternal decree of unconditional election is as unchangeable as God is Himself, as Article 1:11 expresses in these words: “*As God himself is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing and almighty, so his election can neither be undone and redone, nor changed, revoked, or annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number be diminished*”. This truth underpins the assurance of salvation which is the subject of the next few articles in the Canons of Dort, which we’ll consider next week by God’s grace.

Many Christians do not have an understanding of the Biblical doctrine of God’s decree of unconditional election. What is the purpose of knowing, understanding, proclaiming this doctrine? Great comfort –that faith ultimately does not depend on us. Great comfort in the raising of children – we are to be faithful in “bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”, with all the responsibility that entails, and yet we cannot save them ourselves. In our evangelism, we are to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel, with all the responsibility that entails, yet we cannot save the people we minister to. Our methods, as parents and as proclaimers of Christ to others, may be more/less effective but they do not save others. God alone saves (e.g. Acts 13:48 *“When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”).* Preaching/teaching of doctrine of election must not remove/weaken earnest call to sinners to respond in repentance and faith. Preaching of the gospel is the means God has chosen to use to inexorably bring those he has chosen to saving faith.

Brothers and Sisters, the Biblical doctrine of election is a spiritual blessing, a doctrine to be feared by those who reject Christ in their hearts, but a doctrine to be loved, as a spiritual blessing, for all who love the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

AMEN.