**Joy in the doctrines of grace**

Text: Acts 13:48

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 46:8-13; Acts 13:44-52

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 166, 440, 116b, 439, 180

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#18; Articles 5:14-5:15)

**Theme:** The perseverance of the saints and all the other doctrines of grace are hated by Satan, ridiculed by the unbelieving world, but loved by the bride of Christ.

**Proposition:** Rejoice because as many as are appointed to eternal life will believe in Christ Jesus and will never lose their salvation.

**Introduction**

Some people say that the Bible teaches Calvinism. Whilst there is a sense in which this is very much true, it can be an unhelpful thing to say because the word ‘Calvinism’ links directly to the 16th century French theologian, pastor and reformer John Calvin. As Reformed Churches we are ‘Calvinistic’ but **not** because we follow the teaching of John Calvin, as though this were the **primary** source of our theology. Rather, we are ‘Calvinistic’ because Calvin, along with others, re-discovered and then taught what the Scriptures reveal about salvation.

Article 5.15 of the Canons of Dort confirms this about God’s preservation of His elect in these words: “*This doctrine of the perseverance of true believers and saints, and of their assurance of it,* ***God has most abundantly revealed in his Word*** *for the glory of his name and for the consolation of the godly, and he impresses it on the hearts of believers*”. Calvinism teaches ‘*once truly saved, always saved*’ because this is what the Bible reveals.

The label ‘Calvinism’ can be off-putting and misleading for some people. A more helpful, less confusing, phrase to replace the term ‘Calvinism’ is ‘The Doctrines of Grace’. These core Scriptural truths about how sinners are saved by Almighty God through His only begotten Son Jesus Christ are summarised in the acronym TULIP. We have been studying these in our afternoon services over the past nine months and today we come to the final sermon (#18) focusing mainly on the last article of the ‘*Fifth head of doctrine: the perseverance of the saints*’. This article (5:15) is titled ‘*This doctrine is hated by Satan but loved by the church*’.

As we started this preaching series, I noted that the name “Canons of Dort” sounds a little strange today. The word ‘canon’ refers here, not to a large gun firing metal balls, but to a body of rules, principles or standards. The little preposition word ‘of’ means belonging to/originating in. ‘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. This meeting consisted of 154 sessions during which the views of the followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) were compared to Scripture.

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, in ways that can be understood by human beings, the relationship between God’s sovereignty and mankind’s free will, especially in relation to salvation.

Whilst Arminianism emphasises the responsibility of man; Calvinism emphasises the sovereignty of God. The Canons of Dort contain what we now know as the ‘five points of Calvinism’. These are often expressed in the acronym TULIP:

1. **T**otal depravity
2. **U**nconditional election
3. **L**imited atonement
4. **I**rresistible grace
5. **P**erseverance of the saints

The five ‘heads’ of the Canons of Dort are actually ordered U.L.T.I.P. Originally the third and fourth heads were combined so there were really only four points. Something like ULTP. Tulip is easier to remember! So now, as we address the last part of the ‘P’ from the Canons of Dort, we are going to also summarise all the Doctrines of Grace from our text in Acts 13:44-52 under two headings: a) Hated doctrines; b) Loved doctrines

1. **Hated doctrines**

Paul and Barnabas had a rough time at Antioch in Pisidia; the site of the modern-day Turkish town of Isparta. Their visited ended with them being driven out of the district by the persecution that arose when the unbelieving Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city (Acts 13:50). The unbelieving Jews hated the truths that Paul and Barnabas were teaching as ‘*almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord*’ (Acts 13:44). These unbelieving Jews did not respond well to the good gospel doctrine that Paul and Barnabas were faithfully proclaiming.

When they ‘*saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him*’ (Acts 13.45). All they heard was ‘competition’ that challenged their position as the religious authorities of the day. To those who are perishing, the word of the cross is folly (1 Cor 1:18).

In Acts chapter 13 verses 6b-41 we see that the gospel is proclaimed as a means of grace to all who will listen and believe. This is the principle that is the subject of Canons of Dort Article 3:17 ‘The use of means’ which is also more specifically applied to God’s preservation of His elect in Canons of Dort Article 5:14: “*Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he maintains, continues, and perfects it* ***by the hearing and reading of his Word****, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments*”. Our text in verse 48 records the response of the non-Jews to the gospel. “*And 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*”.

The ‘hated doctrines’ of Calvinism are all anchored in the truth revealed by one word in our text. That word is ‘appointed’. This means to ‘appoint, designate, set aside; command, order, direct’. This verb was used in the ancient Greek world to mean ‘drawing up in order of battle’. In this verse, the perfect tense of this verb pictures a past completed action with present ongoing effect or result and so could be translated “*were appointed and the appointment remains in force*.” We can clearly see here the ‘P’ of TULIP revealed in Scripture. It is God who appoints, set aside, His people to eternal life and once appointed, that appointment remains in force. More simply put ‘*once truly saved, always saved*’.

Why is this doctrine not understood by the flesh? (CofD Art 5:15). As limited finite creatures, apart from by faith, we cannot understand how God can be so much in control of all things that He can eternally secure His people so that nobody can ‘*snatch them out of His hand*’ (John 10:29).

Why is this doctrine ‘hated by Satan’? (CofD Art 5:15). Because it reveals the almighty authority, covenant love, faithfulness, mercy and grace of God. This doctrine teaches us that God is everything that the Devil is not.

Why is this doctrine ‘ridiculed by the world’? (CofD Art 5:15). Because the unbelieving world is unwilling to accept the complete sovereignty of God over everything. Naturally, fallen people like us want to rule ourselves, or at least be ruled by another person like us, not by God ‘*against whom no counsel can avail and no strength can prevail*’ (CofD Art 5:15).

This phrase in the Canons of Dort, reflects the Scriptures. For example where God Himself declares, through His prophet Isaiah: “*I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'*” (Isaiah 46:9b-10). People hate Calvinism, that is hate the doctrines of grace, because God is Almighty God, completely sovereign over all.

I commend to you a small book (122 pages) by author Greg Dutcher, a Calvinistic pastor. It is titled “*Killing Calvinism: how to destroy a perfectly good theology from the inside*”. (‘Killing Calvinism’ has been described (by Tim Challies) as ‘part confession, part teaching, part exhortation’).

Greg Dutcher looks first to himself and his own tendency to be a Calvinist first and a Christian second, that is to be more concerned with a theological system than with the gospel itself. Using a powerful illustration, Dutcher writes: *“I am concerned that many Calvinists today do little more than celebrate how wonderfully clear their theological windshield is. But like a windshield, Reformed theology is not an end in itself. It is simply a window to the awe-inspiring universe of God’s truth, filled with glory, beauty, and grace”.*

Brothers and sisters, we need to be careful that others do not come to hate the doctrines of grace because we live and speak in such a way that we ‘destroy’ sound Biblical theology. Dutcher lists eight ways that we may unintentionally do this:

1. By loving Calvinism as an end in itself
2. By becoming a theologian instead of a disciple
3. By loving God’s sovereignty more than God himself
4. By losing an urgency in evangelism
5. By learning only from other Calvinists
6. By tidying up the Bible’s “loose ends”
7. By being an arrogant know-it-all
8. By scoffing at the hang-ups others have with Calvinism

Instead of this, we are called by the Lord to ‘*always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that is in us with gentleness and respect*’ (1 Pet 3:15-16). Why? Because we love the Lord, the divine author of the Doctrines of Grace, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Loved doctrines**

Do you love John Calvin? For me, I can say ‘Yes’, as a brother in the Lord, although clearly, I have never met him. He died on 27th May 1564 in Geneva, Switzerland. One day, in the New Heavens and New Earth, I will have the opportunity to say ‘Bonjour’ to him and enjoy fellowship with an ‘older brother’ in the Lord who has been greatly used to bring about necessary reformation in the church. I am confident of this, despite my own personal faults and failures, because my salvation depends not on me, but upon God ‘*against whom no counsel can avail and no strength can prevail*’ (CofDArt 5:15). This is deeply comforting and assuring for me, how about you?

I could also truly say that I love Calvinism because I love the doctrines of grace, because I love the God of grace. The Doctrines of Grace are at the heart of gospel. Notice again the believing response to the message that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed in Pisidian Antioch: “*And 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). To rejoice is to be cheerful, happy and full of joy. Here it means to rejoice in God’s grace. The root of the Greek word translated ‘rejoicing’ is the same as the word translated ‘grace’ in the New Testament. The doctrines of grace are inherently joyful because grace itself is to those who receive it.

There’s an English word we don’t use much at all today. It is ‘dour’ meaning ‘*relentlessly severe, stern, or gloomy in manner or appearance*’. There is a popular caricature of Christians who believe in the doctrines of grace as being ‘dour Calvinists’. We should certainly be serious about doctrine, as the Apostles were, but this does not mean we should be ‘relentlessly severe, stern of gloomy’ quite the contrary.

Brothers and sisters, surely we should be the most joyful of all people, knowing that God appoints His elect people to eternal life with the result that we are eternally secure in Christ. It is a source of abundant joy to know that nothing and nobody can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39).

The Canons of Dort, in focussing especially on the doctrine of God’s sovereign preservation of His elect, helpfully states that, in contrast to those who hate the doctrines of grace: “*The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this doctrine most tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a treasure of inestimable value*”. As Reformed Churches, we are ‘confessional churches’ who officially agree that the teaching of God’s Word is ‘*faithfully summarised in the creeds and confessions of this church*’ (Profession of faith form vow#1).

All office-bearers (deacons, elders and ministers) vow that they ‘*believe that the whole system of doctrine as taught in the creeds and confessions of this church fully agrees with the Word of God*’ (installation/ordination form vow#3). As office-bearers, we love the doctrines of grace and defend them, including the ‘perseverance of the saints’ steadfastly ‘as a treasure of inestimable value’.

As Paul and Barnabas left Pisidian Antioch they ‘shook off the dust from their feet’ – a Jewish sign of displeasure and disassociation (cf. Matt 10:14; Mark 6:11). The hatred of the gospel by some is not a cause for us to be grumpy or discouraged, but rather we can remain joyful because God has graciously decided to save some people. Luke records in Acts 13:52. “*And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit*”. Brothers and sisters, let us be the opposite of severe, stern and gloomy as Calvinists. That is gentle, friendly and cheerful in the grace of the Lord. This is pleasing to God and glorifies Him

As we come now to the end of our series through the Canons of Dort and to the last part of the last Article, we read: “*To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honour and glory forever. Amen*”. The Canons of Dort, as a theological document over 400 years old, glorify God because the Calvinism they teach is the truth of Scripture. This is why this church, part of the wider the bride of Christ, loves these Doctrines of Grace. Praise the Lord for the privilege we have as a church of being stewards of the treasure of these precious doctrines.

Let us not be carelessly *“killing Calvinism” – that is destroying a perfectly good theology from the inside* but rather joyfully, gently, and cheerfully proclaiming the gospel of God’s sovereign grace to others, as we have opportunity.

AMEN.