

Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)
Class Three: “The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort*”

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1. The question that I propose to address is how the Canons of Dort maintain the connection between election and the assurance of salvation. One of the explicit themes in the Canons is the comfort that the church of Jesus Christ should derive from the confession of God’s sovereign and gracious election of his people in Christ. For example, in the important conclusion to the Canons, which offers a summary of “false accusations” against the Reformed understanding of election, ministers of the gospel of Christ are encouraged to teach the doctrine of election “with a view to the glory of God’s name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls.”¹ The inclusion of this encouragement in the conclusion of the Canons witnesses to the authors’ desire to emphasize the comfort afforded by the Scriptural doctrine of election. The language of the conclusion also aims to refute the accusation of the Arminian party within the Dutch Reformed churches that the doctrine of unconditional election either undermines the believer’s assurance of salvation or lends support to a careless presumption that is incompatible with the Scripture’s teaching.

2. The topic of assurance played an important role in Arminius’ formulation of the doctrine of election and dissent from the prevalent Reformed doctrine.² In the course of the controversy, the Remonstrant or Arminian party presented their opinions regarding the traditional Reformed view in a way that also underscored the problems this view allegedly creates for the believer’s ability to obtain an appropriate assurance of salvation and God’s electing favor.

Arminius offers a comprehensive account of these two problems of assurance in his *Declaration of Sentiments*. After appealing to the words of the author of Hebrews—“He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”—Arminius offers a definition of false “security” and of “despair”:

Security [Latin: *securitas*; Dutch: *sorgloosheyt*, “carelessness”] operates, when a man persuades himself, that, how inattentive soever he may be to the worship of God, he will not be damned, but will obtain salvation. Despair [Latin: *desperation*; Dutch, *wanhoop*, “hopelessness”] is in operation, when a person entertains a persuasion, that, whatever degree of reverence he may evince towards God, he will not receive any remuneration. In what human mind soever either of these pests is fostered, it is impossible that any true and proper worship of God can there reside.—Now both of them are overturned by the words of the Apostle: For if a man firmly believes, “that God will bestow eternal life on those alone who seek him but that he will inflict on the rest death eternal,” he can on no account indulge himself in security. And if he likewise believes, that “God is truly a rewarder of

¹ “Conclusion: Rejection of False Accusations,” in *The Good Confession: Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, revised classroom ed. (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2013 [1991]), 178 (emphasis mine). The citations from the Canons throughout this essay are taken from this volume.

² Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182, describe the topic of assurance as a “point of departure” for Arminius’ formulation of an alternative doctrine of election to the prevalent Reformed understanding.

those who diligently seek Him,” by applying himself to the search he will not be in danger of falling into despair.³

3. Assurance in the Opinions of the Remonstrants: In the Fifth Opinion, they affirm that a true assurance of salvation is possible for believers, but such assurance must be distinguished from the careless security that the Reformed view encourages. While those who believe the gospel promise and endeavor to live accordingly may have an assurance of their salvation so long as they believe, they may not have a certain assurance that God will preserve them to the end, or that such perseverance is an invariable “effect” of God’s absolute decree to save them. Because true believers can and do fail to persevere in faith and godliness, thereby losing the salvation that was once theirs, they do not have assurance that in the future God will effectively preserve them “in faith and those works of piety and love which are fitting.”⁴ Since their election and salvation depends upon a persevering faith, the assurance of salvation that believers have “for the present time” does not include an assurance with respect to the future. To affirm a certain assurance of future preservation is neither necessary nor beneficial, since such assurance encourages carelessness and inattention to the “diligent watchfulness” to which the Scriptures call all believers. Thus, in a remarkably clear manner, the Fifth Opinion of the Remonstrants accurately expresses the concerns of Arminius regarding the predominant Reformed view of assurance, especially his fear that it encourages a false and careless security.

4. Assurance of Salvation in the First Main Point of Doctrine: Unconditional Election

a. The “Unmistakeable Marks of Election”: Articles 12-13

Already in Article 6, which offers the first formulation of the doctrine of unconditional election, the Canons speak of the way this teaching offers “holy and godly souls with comfort beyond words.” However, Articles 12 and 13 present the most direct testimony regarding the assurance of election and salvation in the First Main Point. The first of these articles describes the way in which such assurance may be obtained, and the second distinguishes true assurance from what the Canons call a “carnal self-assurance.”

Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing 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 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. (Art. 12)

In their awareness and assurance of this election God’s children daily find greater cause to humble themselves before God, to adore the fathomless depth of his mercies, to cleanse themselves, and to give fervent love in return to him who first so greatly loved them. This is far from saying that this teaching concerning election, and reflection upon it, make God’s children lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured. By God’s just judgment this does usually happen to those who casually take for granted the grace of

³ *Declaration of Sentiments*, in *WJA*, 1.637-38.

⁴ De Jong, *ibid.*, 268.

election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen. (Art. 13)

b. Article 17: Assurance of the Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy

Perhaps one of the most important affirmations regarding the assurance of election and salvation in the Canons is found in Article 17 of the First Main Point. This Article was not part of an earlier draft of the Canons, but was added at the insistence of some of the delegations to the Synod of Dort.⁵ These delegations asked for the addition of Article 17 in order to answer a common objection to the Reformed doctrine of election among the Remonstrants. According to the Remonstrants, the Reformed teaching on election offered no comfort or assurance to godly parents whose infant children were called out of this life in their infancy. Among the “false accusations” identified in the conclusion to the Canons, this Remonstrant complaint is explicitly acknowledged. The Reformed doctrine is said to imply “that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers’ breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them.”⁶

The answer to this Remonstrant accusation in Article 17 is of special importance for determining the Canons’ approach to the topic of the assurance. In response to the Remonstrants, the authors of the Canons provide a robust statement of the undoubted assurance believing parents may have regarding the election and salvation of their children whom God chooses to call to himself in infancy.

Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy. (Art. 17)

Though this Article is formulated as a *litotes*, a figure of speech that expresses a positive truth in a negative form, it encourages godly parents to have a firm assurance of the election and salvation of such children. Rather than speculatively inquiring into the secret will of God regarding such children, godly parents may rest their confidence in what God has revealed in his Word concerning the covenant of grace and the promise that these children belong to him.⁷ Whatever judgment is rendered respecting these children, it must be made upon the basis of God’s revelation. No room is left to speculate about God’s gracious will respecting them, inasmuch as God has revealed how

⁵ For more extensive treatments of the background and significance of Article I/17, see W. Robert Godfrey, “A Promise for Parents: Dordt’s Perspective on Covenant and Election,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 373-86; Erik A. De Boer, “O, ye Women, Think of Thy Innocent Children, When They Die Young!” The Canons of Dordt (First Head, Article Seventeen) between Polemic and Pastoral Theology,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, ed. Goudrian and Van Lieburg, 261-90; and Cornelis P. Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2016), 214-55.

⁶ Conclusion: *Rejection of False Accusations*.

⁷ The most frequently quoted Scripture texts in support of this affirmation at the Synod were: Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; and 1 Cor. 7:14. These texts are cited in the Dutch edition of the *Acta* of the Synod.

he regards them and graciously wills to receive them into his fellowship through Christ.⁸ These children must be regarded in terms of what we know about their special status as children of the promise.

Remarkably, the Canons' affirmation of the assurance of election and salvation in Article 17 is based solely upon the objective grounds of God's Word and the covenant relationship he grants such children. Unlike Article 12, which appeals to the "unmistakeable fruits of election" as a basis for assurance, the focus of this Article is wholly upon the *a priori* grounds for assurance.

c. No Assurance Possible on the Basis of Conditional Election: Rejection of Errors

The third place in the First Main Point of Doctrine that addresses the issue of assurance is in the Rejection of Errors, particularly Errors VI and VII. According to these two Rejections, the Remonstrants' teaching, following Arminius, seriously undermines the sure basis for the believer's assurance of salvation in God's unchangeable, steadfast and unconditional purpose of election. In these Rejections, the Canons emphasize the certain ground for the believer's confidence in God's gracious purpose of election. These Rejections accent the *a priori* and objective foundation of assurance in God's decision to elect his people in Christ unto salvation.

Rejection VI considers the Arminian view that God's election in Christ is a conditional and consequent will, which depends for its effect upon a persevering faith on the part of those who are called through the gospel. According to the Remonstrants' teaching, some of the chosen "can perish and do in fact perish eternally, with no decision of God to prevent it."

Rejection VII offers a similar criticism of the Remonstrant position. According to this Rejection, the Remonstrant doctrine of conditional election makes any assurance of salvation conditional upon "something changeable and contingent." The Arminian view does not provide any sure footing for an assurance of "one's unchangeable election to glory." The best the Arminian view can offer is a "uncertain assurance," which is "absurd" and incompatible with the teaching of Scripture. On the Arminian view, the sure confidence that is expressed in Scripture, that the names of God's people "have been written in heaven" (Luke 10:20) and no one can bring any charge against them (Rom. 8:33), is undermined. In this way, believers are exposed to the "flaming arrows of the devil's temptations," and are stripped of their confidence in God's unchangeable election of his people to glory.

4. Assurance in the Second Main Point of Doctrine: Particular Redemption

As true God and true man, Christ the Mediator has made an atonement that is of "infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world" (Art. 3). The good news of Christ's atoning work, together with the promise to all that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life, therefore, "ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people" (Art. 5). Through the call of the gospel, all sinners are graciously promised salvation upon the basis of Christ's atoning work, and are commanded to believe and repent. That many who are called through the gospel do not repent or believe in Christ is not due to any "deficiency" or "insufficiency" in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Those who respond in unbelief are "themselves at fault" (Art. 6). However, that some of those called genuinely

⁸ Godfrey, "Dordt's Perspective on Covenant and Election," 386: "Their reasoning was that those incorporated as infants into the covenant of grace sustained a saving relationship to God unless they later in life rejected that covenant. Since those dying in infancy could not reject the covenant, they must be elect and saved."

believe and are saved is “solely from God’s grace—which he owes to no one—given to them in Christ from eternity” (Art. 7).

After these introductory articles, which emphasize the sufficiency of Christ’s work of atonement for all sinners whom God graciously calls to faith and repentance through the gospel, the authors of the Canons turn to the subject of the “saving effectiveness” of Christ’s death and the “fulfillment of God’s plan” for the salvation of those whom he has chosen.

For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his son’s costly death should work itself out in his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to glory. . . . [And that Christ] should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit’s other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death) . . . (Art. 8)

This plan, arising out of God’s eternal love for his chosen ones, from the beginning of the world to the present time has been carried out in the future, the gates of hell seeking vainly to prevail against it. (Art. 9)

Even though these Articles do not explicitly address the topic of assurance, they have undeniable implications for the believer’s confidence and assurance. Unlike the Arminian view, which affirms the universal extent of Christ’s atonement but denies that it secures the salvation of anyone, the Canons insist that Christ’s atonement effectively ensures the salvation of all of those for whom he died. Furthermore, the accomplishment of redemption through Christ’s work of atonement is applied in time by Christ himself through his Spirit. All that Christ procured for his people is unfailingly communicated to them by the ministry of the Spirit. Unlike the Arminian view, the work of Christ as surety guarantees the salvation of those for whom he died and to whom he applies its benefits through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Believers may be assured of their salvation, therefore, upon the basis of the unchanging and invincible purpose of the three Persons of the Trinity, each of whom works in concert with the others to plan, accomplish, and communicate the benefits of Christ’s saving work to his own.

5. Assurance in the Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine: Radical Depravity and Effectual Grace

a. The Call of the Gospel: Universal, Serious, and Genuine: Remarkably, the teaching of the Canons at this point presents a none-too-subtle rebuke to the Remonstrants, who in their “Opinions” had maintained that the Reformed view of unconditional election was incompatible with what is often termed the “well-meant” or “sincere call” of the gospel.⁹ Using language that was employed in the Remonstrant Opinions, the Canons affirm unqualifiedly that the gospel Word is to be communicated graciously to all of its recipients, expressing a sincere and serious summons

⁹ For treatments of the sincere and well-meant offer of the gospel in Reformed theology, including a consideration of its consistency with particular election and redemption, see John Murray, “The Free Offer of the Gospel,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:114-31; John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, 1:107-32; Robert Lewis Dabney, “God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy As Related to His Power, Wisdom, and Sincerity,” in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982 [1891]), 1:282-313; and Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 107-25.

to all to respond in faith and repentance in order to be saved.¹⁰ All who hear the gospel Word are sincerely summoned to do what the Word demands, namely, believe and repent. All are likewise sincerely and truthfully promised that, if they should do so, they may be sure of their salvation through faith in Christ. For this reason, all who refuse the gospel's call in unbelief and impenitence have only themselves to blame for their rejection of the gospel promise. They may not blame the gospel Word, Christ who is offered through the gospel, or God who calls them and even bestows "various gifts upon them." Their willful and obstinate unbelief and impenitence remain their own responsibility and occasion for their remaining under condemnation.

b. Effectual Calling and Assurance: Within the setting of these emphases upon the radical depravity of fallen sinners and the seriousness of the gospel call, the most important and extensively-treated topic in the Third and Fourth Points is what might termed the "effectual" conversion of the elect by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who uses the means of the Word to grant faith and repentance to them. In an important summary of this topic, the Canons insist that those who are brought to conversion by the ministry of the gospel are not ultimately distinguished from others by their "free choice" to believe. God does not merely furnish all with an "equal or sufficient grace for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains)," and then wait upon some to do what is required of them by their own power (Art. 10). Even though the Remonstrant position, unlike Pelagius, acknowledges the prevenience and necessity of God's grace in order for some to believe and repent, it fails to acknowledge the effectual working of the Spirit in granting faith and repentance to those whom God elects to save and for whom Christ's atonement was provided. While the Remonstrant position may seem to repudiate a proud Pelagianism, which ascribes salvation to human merit, it retains the root error of all Pelagian and semi-Pelagian views: what ultimately accounts for the salvation of some persons is their free choice to cooperate with, or not resist, the call of the gospel. The Remonstrant view fails to strip away the proud boast of those who believe their salvation depends ultimately upon something they do in response to the gospel call, which is always able to be rendered ineffectual by the sinner's unwillingness to believe. In reply to such pride, the Canons offer a resounding "no"!

No, it [true conversion] must be credited to God: just as from eternity he chose his own in Christ, so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance, and, having rescued them from the dominion of darkness, brings them into the kingdom of his Son, in order that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into the marvelous light, and may boast not in themselves, but the Lord, as apostolic words frequently testify in Scripture. (Art.10)

In the remaining articles of the Third and Fourth Main Points, the Canons present an account of the Spirit's work in conversion that emphasizes the effectual calling of the elect through the Spirit's use of the gospel and the ordinary means of grace. What the Remonstrant view fails to acknowledge is that God's grace is not only prevenient and necessary, but also effectual to the conversion of all those whom God has elected to salvation. When the Holy Spirit works with the Word, he not only enlightens the mind to understand the gospel but

¹⁰ "Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhyprocritical intention and will to save" (*The Opinions of the Remonstrants*, in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. De Jong, 265).

he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good treat, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds. (Art. 11)

The work of the Spirit in conversion is, accordingly, a supernatural and incomprehensible activity, which goes beyond a mere “moral persuasion” or illumination of the mind (Art. 12).¹¹ “All those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active” (Art. 12).

Though the Canons’ teaching on the work of the Spirit in regeneration and conversion is often described as “irresistible grace,” this language does not capture well the way they describe the concurrence between the Spirit’s work and the responsible engagement of those whom the Spirit effectually calls. The teaching of the Canons assumes that, absent the powerful and effectual working of the Holy Spirit in conversion, all sinners would invariably resist the gospel’s call to faith and repentance. However, when the Spirit regenerates and effectually grants faith and repentance to believers, he works in a powerful, yet non-coercive way to draw them to turn to God. The “divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and — in a manner at once pleasing and powerful — bends it back” (Art. 16). The gracious work of the Holy Spirit restores and liberates the will of believers so that they willingly and gladly embrace the gospel promise by faith. Furthermore, the work of the Spirit ordinarily takes place by the use of the means of grace, especially the gospel Word concerning Christ (Art. 17). In his wisdom, God has appointed the Word to be “the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul.” By means of the gospel Word, the administration of the sacraments, and discipline, God is pleased by the work of his Spirit to grant faith and advance his saving purpose. For this reason, all the glory for the salvation of fallen sinners is owed to God whose Spirit alone effectually grants believers what the gospel call demands. No place is left for believers to think that their own free choice to believe is what ultimately causes them to be distinguished from others (Art. 15).

6. Assurance in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints

The Canons’ teaching regarding the effectual work of the Spirit in granting faith and repentance to those whom he saves has far-reaching implications for the question of assurance. However, these implications are spelled out most fully in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine, “The Perseverance of the Saints.” In the Fifth Point, we discover the most extensive affirmations in the Canons regarding the assurance of salvation. These affirmations capture in summary form the way the authors of the Canons view the correlation between the doctrine of election and the believer’s assurance of salvation.

¹¹ The Canons at this point are responding to the Arminian tendency to grant priority to the intellect over the will and affections in the sinner’s response to the gospel. The priority of the intellect in relation to the affections and will allows for the view that the movement of the will toward God is an act motivated by the intellect rather than by God’s effectual grace. On this topic, see Richard A. Muller, “The Priority of the Intellect in the Soteriology of Jacob Arminius,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55/ 1 (1993): 55-72.

In Article 6 of the Fifth Main Point, the authors describe God's saving intervention and preservation of those whom he has chosen to save:

For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin.

The burden of this affirmation is that believers are only able to persevere in the Christian life as they are preserved by God. Left to themselves, believers would not be able to remain steadfast in their profession to the end. But believers are not left to themselves in the course of their life. God, who in his unfathomable mercy chose them in Christ for salvation, will not abandon his gracious purpose toward them. Nor will he leave them without the aid and comfort of his indwelling Spirit, the same Spirit who through the Word of the gospel effectually called them to faith in and fellowship with Christ, the Mediator. As the following Article declares, God preserves in them the imperishable seed by which he first gave them birth (Art. 7). Through the same means whereby God initially brought them into fellowship with himself, the Word and Spirit, God will "certainly and effectively" renew unto repentance those who have fallen into sin.

Because the perseverance of believers stems from God's gracious work of preservation, the authors of the Canons follow their affirmation about preservation with a resounding affirmation of its certainty:

So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit cannot neither be invalidated nor wiped out. (Art. 8)

In this Article, all of the main themes of the Canons' teaching regarding God's unconditional election in Christ are echoed. The certainty of the perseverance of the saints finds its sure ground in the purposes and works of the Triune God himself: God the Father in his eternal and unchangeable decision to save them in Christ; God the Son in his work as Mediator, making atonement for their sins and acquiring for them all the benefits of his saving work; and God the Spirit who works effectually through the Word to grant them perseverance in faith and repentance. The doctrine of unconditional election inseparably joins together both God's glory as the Author of salvation and his people's comfort as the beneficiaries of his saving work.

7. The Assurance of Perseverance and Preservation: Articles 10-15

Not surprisingly, after affirming the certainty of the preserving grace of God, the Fifth Main Point follows with several articles that affirm the assurance believers may have regarding their election and salvation, including their perseveration in God's grace. In these articles, we

discover the most significant statements in the Canons regarding the topic of the assurance of salvation.

While recognizing that believers are assured of their preservation “in accordance with the measure of their faith,” the Canons insist that they “can and do become assured,” being confident “that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sin and eternal life” (Art. 9). Such assurance does not stem from “some private revelation beyond or outside of the Word” of God (Art. 10). Rather, it is based upon the rich promises of the gospel, the testimony of the Spirit with our spirits, and the fruits of the Spirit’s work, namely, faith and the pursuit of good works. Upon the basis of these considerations, believers have a “well-founded comfort that the victory will be theirs” and a “reliable guarantee of eternal glory.”¹² In the formulation of the grounds for the assurance of salvation in this Article, it is significant that the first two grounds, the promises of the gospel that are “plentifully revealed” in God’s Word for our comfort and the testimony of the Holy Spirit with our spirit (Rom. 8:16-17), belong properly to what are termed the *a priori* foundations of assurance. They concern the objective basis of the believer’s confidence before God, the reliable promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Spirit’s testimony to these promises. Though the Canons return to an emphasis that we noted previously in I/12, which speaks of the “unmistakeable fruits of election,” it is clear that the consideration of the fruits of election at this point is subordinate to the objective basis for assurance in the gospel Word. The presence of such marks of election and salvation derives from the gospel promise itself, namely, that those whom God elects, he also calls, justifies, and glorifies.

In the remaining articles of the Fifth Point, the Canons provide an account of the way the assurance of preservation expresses itself in the course of the Christian life. Recalling an earlier acknowledgement of the struggle with doubt that some believers experience in the course of their life, the Canons admit that believers occasionally have to contend “with various doubts of the flesh” (Art. 11). Indeed, there may be times when believers do not enjoy the “full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance.” Nevertheless, we may be confident that at no time will God the Father permit them to be tempted beyond their ability to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13). We may be sure that in due time God will revive in them the assurance of their preservation by the work of his Holy Spirit. Contrary to the charge of Arminius and the Remonstrants that such assurance encourages “carelessness,” the Canons insist that it encourages believers to humbly depend upon God’s gracious work (Art. 12-13). Reflection upon the work of God in graciously preserving his people stimulates believers “to a serious and continual practice of thanksgiving and good works,” and to a “much greater concern to observe carefully the ways of the Lord which he prepared in advance.” By the same means that God uses to draw believers to himself through faith in Christ, he also preserves them:

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments. (Art. 14)

¹² The grounds of assurance in this Article are remarkably similar to those set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 18.2, which affirms that a true believer may have an “infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.”

Believers do not enjoy or grow in assurance in any other way than through the ordinary use of those means God has appointed to save his people. In the closing article of the Fifth Point, the Canons commend the teaching of the assurance of preservation as a teaching loved by the bride of Christ, cherished as a priceless treasure, and aimed at ascribing all glory in salvation to God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Art. 15).

8. The Errors of the Remonstrants on Assurance

In the Rejection of Errors on the topic of perseverance, the Canons refute several features of the Remonstrant position. The first of these errors is the teaching that perseverance is a “condition” of the new covenant, which genuine believers are not promised “as an effect of election or a gift of God produced by Christ’s death” (I). According to the Remonstrants, in the same way that election and salvation are dependent upon free will, so perseverance in the way of faith depends upon the “choice of man’s will whether or not he perseveres” (II). The Remonstrants falsely teach that true believers, who once enjoyed salvation and new birth by the work of Christ’s Spirit, can and often do “forfeit” their salvation by failing to remain steadfast in faith and obedience (III). Such believers can commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, and as a result fall from the state of grace and salvation (IV). Perhaps one of the most objectionable features of the Remonstrants’ teaching is the claim that “the assurance of perseverance and of salvation is by its very nature and character an opiate of the flesh and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayer, and other exercises” (VI). Rather than enjoying the comfort of the assurance of perseverance, the Remonstrants falsely teach that doubt regarding such perseverance is more “praiseworthy,” since it militates against carelessness and excessive confidence regarding the promise of salvation.