

“The Irresistible Nature of Regeneration”

Canons of Dort: Third-Fourth Head, articles 10, 14; Bible references: Romans 9:14-24; Acts 16:11-15

By Pastor Rand Lankheet, at New Horizon URC, Second sermon, on April 15, 2018

Introduction and point 1: [The objection to the teaching.]

There's a big difference between being sick and being dead. Being sick means that you still

have life, but your life is weak. Being dead means you have no life. Being sick means you still have a heart beat and brain waves that can be registered on medical machines.

But being dead means you have no heart beat, and no brain waves.

Well, the Arminian(阿民念主义者) group in the 17th century taught that unbelievers were “sick” in their sinful nature(罪性).

They were not “dead.” Particularly, they considered the will(意志) as merely being sick, without full strength. They taught that as unbelievers took the first weak steps toward God, God would give them more strength. And they could gradually come to faith in Jesus.

By the way, most Christians today would agree with the Arminians. They would disagree with us.

One verse this group often uses is Revelation chapter 3, verse 20. It is a well-known verse, where Jesus is writing to the church in Laodicea. Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and know. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him...”

There you have it, say the Arminians. Jesus is referring to peoples' ability to hear the voice of Jesus and to open the door of their heart. Or else, to keep that door closed. Unbelievers have that ability, say most Christians today.

What shall we answer them? Well, in Revelation 3:20, Jesus is writing to the church in Laodicea.

These people are already saved, already converted(被改变). Jesus “knocking on the door” is inviting these believers, to have closer fellowship(团契) with him. To not be “lukewarm,”(不冷不热的) like mildly warm water, as he refers to them earlier in this letter. Instead, Jesus wants them to be like hot water...to be hot in their loving affection for him, for Jesus. So in Rev. 3:20, Jesus speaking about believers, not about unbelievers.

2. So in the document known as the Canons of Dort(多特信经), the biblical teaching is EXPLAINED.

Here's the explanation, as our second point of this sermon. And, really, it all goes back to a strong view of sin, understanding the depths of human depravity(败坏). The Bible explains that all people, by nature, “suppress”(压制,抑制) the natural knowledge of God. They push down, they submerge, any idea of putting faith in Jesus as their Saviour. We learned that from Ro. 1:18.

Or, as Ephesians 2:1 puts it, by nature, all human beings are “dead” in their trespasses(过犯) and sins. Everyone enters this world spiritually dead. Therefore, they cannot even lift a finger, or take one step, towards God.

[See III-IV, article 1. The last part of article 1 refers to Adam and Eve after their fall into sin, and

to all their descendants. They have “forfeited丧失 [the] ... excellent gifts [of God, including free will自由意志]; and in place [of that they] ... became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity虚空, and perverseness (堕落) of judgement; [they] became wicked, rebellious (悖逆的), and obdurate (执拗的, 麻木不仁的) in heart and will....” And article 3 continues, saying that all people are “incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage” to sin.

If people are completely spiritually dead, how then can they ever come to life?

How can they ever be born again? How can they ever put personal trust in Jesus?

Well, very simply, God must give them new life. Again and again we read in the Bible how God

does that. For example, in John chapter 3, Jesus says this to Nicodemus: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Ah, the Spirit gives new life. In theological language we call this “regeneration.” (重生得救) “Regeneration.” A generator (发动机) has to do with power, with energy. In regeneration God by His Spirit gives new spiritual life to people who are spiritually dead. The Spirit does that, normally, in and through the hearing of God's Word. As the Word is preached, the Spirit applies that Word to the unbeliever, and changes that unbeliever.

So Peter says this: “you [believers] have been born again ... through the word of God which lives and abides forever.” 1 Peter 1:23. We are born once, biologically. But we are born again, spiritually, as the Spirit of God, by hearing the Word of God, gives us new life.

In our reading of Romans 10, it is made clear. Though many people have a hard time accepting this truth. Vs. 18 says this of God: “therefore, He [God] has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.” It is all up to God’s will.

That doesn’t seem fair (公平的) on some level, does it? I admit, on some level, it doesn’t seem fair. But the apostle Paul anticipates (预料到) this response. He says, verse 20: “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter (窑匠) have power over the clay (陶土) , to make from the same lump 团 [of clay] one vessel 器皿 [one pot] for honor, and another [pot] for dishonor?”

Who are we to argue with God? That He has decided to give spiritual life to some people on earth, and to not give spiritual life to other people? He is the Potter, at his potter’s wheel. He can do what He wants with the clay. He can do what He wants with all people.

The delegates of Dort pointed out something else, which helps us understand a bit more.

Think of it: all of us, every single human being, deserves death.

We all deserve God’s wrath, His judgement against us, because of our sin.

There would be no unfairness (不公平) with God if He decided to condemn (判刑 , 谴责) all of us. [Repeat.

So rather than saying God is unfair, we should delight in God’s mercy.

That He has freely decided to show mercy to some people on planet earth.

To give us new spiritual life, so that our wills are able, now, to put faith in Jesus.

Now the particular debate on this point is this: Can unbelievers RESIST (抗拒) God’s regeneration? Can unbelievers REJECT God’s plan to give some of them new life?

The Arminian group said “yes.” Remember, they had a high view of the power of the natural human will. They said, just as some unbelievers can take the first step towards God.

So, other unbelievers, can RESIST taking any steps towards God.

For unbelievers who don’t resist, they will become Christians.

But for unbelievers who do resist, they will NOT become Christians.

3. Now, we must CLARIFY this point.

Most unbelievers will tell you how long they resisted, in some sense, the working of God in their hearts. If you were converted later in life, as a teenager or as an adult, you might remember how you resisted, at first. That when you first learned about Jesus, you may have refused to put faith in Him as your Saviour. At first.

But the point made by Dort is this: Ultimately, those whom God has chosen for eternal life

CANNOT RESIST the word of God’s Spirit. In the end, they will have to give in (让步) ; they will have to yield. The Potter will not let the clay resist His hand, to mold them as He desires. God the Potter, will not let the clay decide whether or not it will be shaped into what the Potter wants.

So, there may be some TEMPORARY resistance, as unbelievers first struggle with the truth of the Gospel. They might not at first come to faith in Jesus. But, ultimately, those whom God has chosen for eternal life, CANNOT RESIST His giving them new life.

Look at III-IV, [article 10. Read article.

Repeat this: “As [God] has chosen HIS own [people] from eternity (永恒) in Christ, so He calls them effectually (有效地) in time.” “Effectually”—that, is, God’s inner call for his elect (选民) [people to be saved] will always be effective. That call of God ultimately cannot be resisted by those people.

So God “confers upon them [gives to them] faith and repentance (悔改) , rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them [brings them over] into the kingdom of His own Son.” Articles 12 and 13 explain this further, using biblical imagery.

Look at III-IV, [article 14. Read article. Repeat this: “Faith [that is, saving faith in Jesus] is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it [saving faith] is in reality

conferred upon him, breathed and infused (使充满 , 加入) into him.” [“Infused” means ...

God also has to give the unbeliever the necessary saving faith to personally trust in Jesus.

As Ephesians 2:8 puts it: “For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” Grace is the gift of God. And faith, saving faith, also comes to us, as a gift of God. We do not generate our faith. Rather, God gives us the ability to put saving faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

4. Where do we find this taught in the Bible? What is the biblical FOUNDATION of this teaching?

The delegates at Dort later quote many verses in this section.

They are found later, in the section called “Rejection of Errors.”

Among other verses quoted by Dort is Ezekiel 36:26. There God says this to unbelieving

Israelites: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” Unbelievers have completely hardened hearts, like stone. God causes people to be saved by replacing their stony hearts, with soft hearts. So that now they are able to put their faith in Jesus.

And one verse from the New Testament, from Ephesians 1:19. The apostle Paul speaks of the

believers in the church of Ephesus. And he speaks of the power of God as [quote] “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.” God shows His special power toward believers, those chosen for eternal life, giving them the power to believe, to trust in Jesus.

I personally like a verse in Acts 16, if you would turn there. It is about one of the stops Paul

made on one of his missionary journeys (宣教旅程) . In the city of Philippi. [Read Acts 16:13-15. Here we read about

what God does to every unbeliever who becomes a believer. Vs. 16:

“The Lord opened her heart [the heart of the once unbelieving woman named Lydia].”

The Lord God opened her naturally closed heart, so that she could truly hear the good news of Jesus. And to then believe that good news. By that special work of God, Lydia came to faith in Jesus as her Saviour.

So we go out with the good news of Jesus today. We talk to unbelieving family and friends.

We talk to neighbours and acquaintances. Yes, the Bible says that is our duty, our responsibility. And we must invite unbelievers to come to church with us.

But, please remember that by nature their hearts are closed to Jesus. They have hearts of stone.

But, thanks be to God! Over time and in His timing, God opens some peoples’ hearts.

He replaces their stony hearts with soft hearts. And God gives the gift of faith to some of them. The faith that they need to trust in Jesus as their Saviour.

And so God has done for you! Praise the Lord! Remember, you were not just “sick” in your sins.

You were not merely “weak” in your ability to trust in Jesus. No! You are I were “dead” in our trespasses and sins. We had no power to put our faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

But God made us alive in Christ. He changed our hearts.

And He gave to us the gift of faith. So that we could trust in Jesus as our Saviour.

Give thanks to God, for His irresistible grace (不可抗拒的恩典) . A saving grace that ultimately you could not resist.

A saving grace that has brought us to faith. Give God thanks all the days of your life!