

**THE ELECTION AND SALVATION OF THE
CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS
WHO DIE IN INFANCY:
A STUDY OF ARTICLE I/17
OF THE CANONS OF DORT**

by Cornelis P. Venema

A COMMON PREJUDICE against the biblical and Reformed teaching concerning election claims that it undermines the assurance of salvation. If the salvation of believers depends ultimately upon God's sovereign choice to save some of the fallen race of Adam and not others, a kind of fatalism is introduced into the order of salvation. Who, after all, can withstand the will of God (cf. Rom. 9:19)? It is alleged that the specter of uncertainty begins to overshadow what we can know of God's grace and favor toward us in Jesus Christ. Since no creature is privy to the "secret things" of God, including the specifics of his sovereign choice to save some and not others, there is no avenue for believers to be confident of God's good will toward them in Christ. Consequently, the teaching of sovereign and gracious election undermines assurance or certainty of salvation. According to this prejudice, the awesome reality of God's foreordination of the salvation of some and the non-salvation of others reduces everything to arbitrariness and uncertainty.¹

¹ For an extended treatment of the charge of "arbitrariness" against the doctrine of election, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 53-101. Though Berkouwer rejects the charge of arbitrariness, he seems to do so by affirming divine election in Christ while

Despite this common prejudice and misrepresentation, a cursory reading of the *Canons of Dort* (the most definitive and universally received statement of the Reformed view) indicates that the key notes throughout this confession are praise toward the Triune God for his amazing, undeserved grace in Christ, and a remarkable confidence in his invincible favor. A fair-minded reader of the *Canons* could scour every nook and cranny of the five heads of doctrine, contemplating every article in turn, and discover an absence of any evidence for the kind of fatalism or uncertainty of salvation that they allegedly encourage. Because salvation does not hang upon the thin thread of their own initiative and perseverance, but upon the solid chain of God's electing purpose in Christ, believers may be assured of their salvation. Sovereign and merciful election furnishes believers with the occasion to give thanks to God on the one hand, and rest confidently in his gracious favor in Christ on the other.² For the authors of the *Canons*, the teaching of election serves "the honor of God's name . . . and the comfort of anxious souls."³

This note of assurance that pervades the *Canons* comes to remarkable expression in one of the articles in The First Head of Doctrine, which treats the subject of "Divine Election and Reprobation." After a series of articles that sets forth the biblical teaching regarding God's election of his people in Christ and his reprobation of others, the authors of the *Canons* address in Article

denying any parallel non-election of others (*Divine Election*, pp. 172-217, esp. p. 180).

² H. Kaajan, *De Groote Synode van Dordrecht in 1618-1619* (Amsterdam: De Standaard, n.d.), p. 175, points out that this pastoral character of the *Canons* was by design.

³ This language is used in the "Rejection of False Accusations" with which the *Canons* conclude. In this chapter, English translations of the *Canons* are taken from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, Classroom Edition (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991). The translation included in this volume is a new translation adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1986. The original Dutch and Latin texts of the *Canons* are published in J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Bolland, 1976), pp. 230-78.

I/17 the question of the election and salvation of the children of believers “whom God calls out of this life 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.⁴

In this Article, which seems to intrude rather abruptly and unexpectedly into the sequence of the preceding articles, the authors of the *Canons* address a question that had arisen in the debates regarding election in the Reformed churches prior to the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618-19: What may we believe regarding the election of the children of godly parents whom God calls out of this life in infancy? The remarkable feature of Article 17 is that it expresses a full confidence regarding God’s favor toward such children. In this instance of the teaching of the *Canons*, sovereign and merciful election, far from casting a shadow over the question of assurance, seems rather to undergird and fuel a robust confidence in God’s favor toward the children of believers.

Our purpose in this essay will be to examine Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort* to ascertain what it reveals about the relation between the teaching of election and the theme of the assurance of salvation. This Article deserves special attention not only because it witnesses so directly to the prominence of the theme of assurance in the *Canons*, but also because it has been relatively neglected in the study of the *Canons*. Though the question addressed in this Article may not be as pressing for many

⁴ “Quandoquidem de voluntate Dei ex Verbo ipsius nobis est iudicandum, quod testator liberos fidelium esse sanctos, non quidem natura, sed beneficio foederis gratuiti, in quo illi cum parentibus comprehenduntur, pii parentes de Electione et salute suorum liberorum, quos Deus in infantia ex hac vita evocat, dubitare non debent” (Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, p. 236). In the Dutch, the language “ought not to doubt” is “moeten . . . niet twijffelen.”

Reformed believers today as it was at the time of the framing of the *Canons*, it remains a question of importance and provides an important window into Reformed teaching in general.

In our consideration of this Article, we will begin with a treatment of the background and occasion for its inclusion in the *Canons*. A proper interpretation of the meaning of this Article requires careful attention to the circumstances that prompted the authors of the *Canons* to include it in the final draft of their confession. After having treated the occasion for its inclusion in the *Canons*, we will then consider the deliberations of the Synod of Dort, which led the delegates to adopt the final language of Article I/17. These deliberations are an important key to a proper interpretation of the meaning of this Article. Though this Article has not been the subject of much direct debate in the history of the Reformed churches,⁵ our analysis will also consider the opinions of Reformed theologians that help illumine its meaning. Before concluding with several observations regarding this Article's teaching, we will also comment on the similarities and dissimilarities between what it affirms and what is taught in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which addresses in its own way the salvation of "elect infants." Our thesis will be that Article I/17 offers a ringing, unqualified affirmation of the confidence believers may have in the election and salvation of their children whom God calls to himself in their infancy.

The Background and Occasion for Article I/17

We have already noted that Article I/17 appears to intrude into the sequence of the articles of the *Canons'* First Head of Doctrine on election and reprobation. Though the Article properly belongs to the *Canons'* teaching regarding election, it introduces a particular question into the more general statement

⁵ An exception to this neglect is the recent article by N. H. Gootjes, "Can Parents Be Sure? Background and Meaning of Canons of Dort, I, 17," *Lux Mundi* 5/4 (December, 1996), pp. 2-6. Though a popular consideration of Article I/17, Gootjes' article provides a helpful statement of the historical discussion of its teaching.

of Scriptures' teaching that is summarized in the First Head of Doctrine. The impression of a break in the articles of the First Head of Doctrine is not surprising, since Article 17 was not included in the first draft of the *Canons* and was only added at the encouragement of some of the delegates in order to answer a common Arminian objection to the teaching of sovereign election. A proper understanding of this Article requires, therefore, that we begin our consideration of it by noting the background and occasion for its ultimate inclusion in the final form of the *Canons*.

The occasion for the inclusion of this Article is mentioned in the important "Rejection of False Accusations" that concludes the *Canons of Dort*. In the "Rejection of False Accusations," the authors of the *Canons* refer to those who, contrary to "truth, equity, and charity," claim that the Reformed teaching of election implies that

... many of the 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

In this description of one complaint against the Reformed teaching of election, the authors of the *Canons* did not engage in an ecclesiastical form of "shadow boxing," but identified one of the common accusations of the Arminians. By alleging that the doctrine of election entailed that many children of believers were reprobate, and that their parents could have no assurance of their

⁶ "Multos fidelium infants ab uberibus matrum innoxios abripi et tyrannice in gehennam praecipitari, adeo ut iis nec Baptismus, nec Ecclesiae in eorum Baptismo preces, prodese queant" (Bakhuizen Van der Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, p. 278). B. B. Warfield, "The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation," in *Studies in Theology* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [1932]), 9:435, fn. 78, suggests that the likely source for the language used by the Arminians in describing the Reformed view is Calvin's reply to Castellio. In Calvin's reply to Castellio, however, the reference is not to the children of believers, but to the general truth that God reprobates some children who die in infancy. Upon the basis of this language, the Arminians charged all Reformed churches with the teaching that God reprobates the deceased infant children of believers and unbelievers alike. See also Gootjes, "Can Parents Be Sure?," p. 3.

salvation, the Arminian party sought to stir up opposition to the Reformed view. To appreciate the background to this allegation, we need to recall briefly the circumstances that led to the convening of the Synod.⁷

When the great Synod of Dort was convened by the States General of the Netherlands in 1618, the aim of the Synod was to settle a dispute within the Reformed churches of the Netherlands regarding the doctrine of election. The instigator of the dispute over Article 16 of the Belgic Confession was Arminius, professor of theology at the University of Leiden. Early in the seventeenth century, Arminius began to raise objections to the traditional formulation of the doctrine of election. A number of theologians and pastors who were sympathetic to Arminius' views met in January of 1610 in the city of Gouda. At this meeting, the Arminian party prepared a "Remonstrance" or petition to be presented to the civil authorities. In this Remonstrance, the Arminians expressed their views on the doctrine of election in five articles. These articles or opinions of the Remonstrants form the background to the Five Heads of Doctrine of the *Canons of Dort*, each of which offers a Reformed response to the Arminian articles on the points in dispute. The delegates to the Synod, who represented not only the Dutch churches but also the Reformed churches throughout Europe, met to formulate a consensus of the teaching of the Reformed churches and to reject the errors of the Arminian party in the Dutch church.

⁷ For the background to the convening of the Synod of Dort, see L. H. Wagenaar, *Van Strijd en Overwinning: De Groote Synode van 1618 op'19 en Wat aan Haar Voorafging* (Utrecht: G. J. A. Ruys, 1909), pp. 1-256; W. Robert Godfrey, "Tensions Within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619," Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford University, 1974), pp. 10-69; Louis Praamsma, "The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618)," in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), pp. 22-38; pp. 3-109; Donald Sinnema, "The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) in Light of the History of this Doctrine," Ph.D. dissertation (University of St. Michael's College, 1985), pp. 136-213; and Keith D. Stanglin, "Arminius *avant la lettre*": Peter Baro, Jacob Arminius, and the Bond of Predestinarian Polemic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 67 (2005): 51-74.

The objection that is addressed in Article I/17 of the *Canons*, was first formally stated at the meeting of the Remonstrants in Gouda in 1610. In the written statements stemming from this meeting, the Arminians expressly rejected any teaching

that God ... has decided to deliver some from this fall and corruption to declare his mercy, and to leave in damnation others, young as well as old, and even some children of covenant people, who are baptized in the name of Christ, when they die in infancy, to declare his righteousness.⁸

Though this statement does not identify any particular source for or instance of the teaching it rejects, it clearly means to imply that the Reformed doctrine of election taught the reprobation of at least some of the covenant children of believing parents who die in infancy. Therefore, among the various objections to the Reformed doctrine of election, the uncertainty regarding the election of the children of believing parents was specifically raised by the Arminian party. Indeed, this objection, as the inclusion of Article I/17 and the notation of it in the *Canons*' concluding "Rejection of False Accusations" confirm, was frequently included among the litany of objections that were presented by the Arminians against the Reformed teaching.

To appreciate the appeal and force of this particular objection of the Arminians, we need to remember that it was bound to have a powerful, emotional appeal at the time. In the early seventeenth century, the infant mortality rate was much higher than is often the case today. It was a rare family that had not been touched by the death of an infant child. Many families of Reformed believers were likely to have witnessed the death of several of their children.⁹ The complaint of the Arminians, therefore, was a

⁸ As quoted and translated by Gootjes, "Can Parents Be Sure?," p. 3. The original text is found in J. Trigland, *Kerckelycke Gescheidenissen* (Leiden: Adriaen Wyngaerden, 1650, p. 525).

⁹ Gootjes, "Can Parents Be Sure?," p. 3: "The average recorded mortality rate in France around this time was between fifteen and thirty percent for babies born alive. Between the ages of one and five, about eighteen percent of

particularly poignant one, since it robbed such parents of any assurance of the salvation of their deceased children. According to the Arminian objection, the parents of such children have no basis to be certain of the election and salvation of their children. Since the Reformed churches teach that God sovereignly elects some and reprobates others, such parents may derive no comfort from the covenant promise to their children, which was signified and sealed to them in baptism. Since God's choice of election discriminates even between those with whom he covenants, the covenant can provide no sure basis for certainty regarding the election of such children. For many, if not most, Reformed parents, this charge was not an abstract point of theology, but a painful addition to their grief over the loss of their children. Not only were such parents sorrowing over the death of their children, but they were also exposed to an even greater sorrow, namely, the fear of the eternal loss and condemnation of their children under the wrath of God.

The background and occasion for the inclusion of Article I/17, therefore, can be found in this common Arminian complaint against the Reformed understanding of election. By including this article in the final draft of the *Canons*, the delegates to the Synod of Dort sought to refute a false accusation and misrepresentation of the implications of their convictions about God's election of his people in Christ.

The Synod of Dort and Article I/17

In order to appreciate the inclusion of Article I/17 in the First Head of Doctrine of the *Canons*, some features of the work of the Synod of Dort need to be noted. After the Remonstrants appearing at the Synod were dismissed early in the proceedings, the Synod adopted a particular procedure to address the Arminian

the children died." Gootjes cites the following sources for this data: L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (rev. ed.; Mammondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 54-8; and L. Clarkson, *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-industrial England* (Dublin: Gil and MacMillan, 1975), p. 5.

controversy.¹⁰ All of the distinct delegations from various branches of the Reformed churches throughout Europe were invited to present their respective “judgments” (*iudicia*) on the five disputed Arminian opinions. Several of the professors of the Dutch churches were invited to present their judgments as well. Only after receiving and compiling these initial judgments did the Synod appoint a committee to write the *Canons*. After this committee had completed its work, the delegations were again offered the opportunity to respond with comments on the draft document. Upon the basis of the delegation’s responses to their draft of the *Canons*, the draft committee then revised and supplemented its initial document for deliberation and eventual adoption by the Synod as a whole.

The actions of the Synod that led to the adoption of Article I/17 have to be viewed in the light of this procedure. Among the materials from the Synod that are relevant to our interpretation of this Article, we need to note the following: (1) the initial judgments (*iudicia*) of the delegates, including the Dutch theologians, that address the question of the election of the children of believers whom God calls out of this life in their infancy; (2) the subsequent request that the draft committee include an article on this subject, since it was not included in the original draft document; (3) the initial proposal of the draft committee for Article I/17; and (4) the revised and final form of Article I/17. If we are to achieve clarity regarding the significance and meaning of this Article, each of these items requires careful attention.

¹⁰ For a treatment of the procedure of the Synod in handling the Remonstrant delegates, see Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, pp. 214-274, 286-92; and Godfrey, *Tensions Within International Calvinism*, pp. 132-64. My description of the Synod’s procedure only highlights its most important features. Prior to the Synod’s appointment of a committee to draft the *Canons*, Johannes Bogerman, president of the Synod, had prepared his own draft document. This document became an important reference point for the committee appointed to draft the *Canons*.

1. *The Initial Statements of the Delegates*

In the initial statements or “judgments” of the various delegations and theologians at the Synod of Dort, there were a number that addressed indirectly or directly the Arminian charge regarding the reprobation of the infant children of believing parents. These judgments not only confirm the importance of this charge to the Arminian case against sovereign election, but they also provide a helpful window into the thinking of the various delegations present at the Synod. Though the final, adopted version of the *Canons* expresses the consensus judgment of the Reformed churches on this question, an awareness of the historical circumstances helps set a context for interpreting the language of Article I/17. These judgments are rather extensive, but we will consider each of them in turn since they provide an important testimony to the range of opinion among the synodical delegates. An awareness of these judgments helps to establish a matrix within which to interpret the actions and final opinion of the Synod that is expressed in Article I/17. Their consideration is also important since some critics of Article I/17 draw heavily upon them.

Among the judgments presented initially to the Synod on the election or reprobation of the children of believing parents, the following are of particular significance.¹¹

The English Theologians. The initial judgment presented to the Synod by the English delegation on the doctrine of election

¹¹ These judgments are printed in the *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode*, ed. J. H. Donner and S. A. Van den Hoorn (Leiden: J. H. Donner, n.d.). In the following, I am making use of the English translations of these judgments that are provided by Homer Hoeksema, in his *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1980), pp. 269-76. On a number of occasions, however, I have slightly modified Hoeksema’s translations to reflect more accurately the original. Hoeksema, for example, often translates the Dutch “jonge” with the English “little,” when it would better be translated “young” or “infant.” Unfortunately, Hoeksema does not cite the sources of his quotations from the synodical *Acta*. Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, pp. 341-71, also cites and translates some relevant portions of these judgments, though his interest is in the broader question of the doctrine of reprobation.

contains an extensive statement on the election of young children. In the section of their judgment that addresses unscriptural propositions concerning election, the English theologians consider the specific proposition that “there is no election of little (*kleine*) children who die before reaching the use of reason.” The most pertinent section of the English delegation’s opinion states that “Scripture presupposes that the names of some little ones are written in the book of life, and that they shall appear before the throne of God, Revelation 20:1; and shall be admitted into the new Jerusalem, Revelation 21:27.... Similarly Luke 18:16, ‘For to such is the kingdom of heaven’.... Hence they were chosen unto this in Christ.”¹² The interesting feature of the English delegation’s judgment is that it does not directly address the issue of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. The judgment of the English theologians argues simply that the sovereign election of God includes the election of children, contrary to the denial of this proposition by the Remonstrants. As such it does not directly answer the particular accusation of the Arminians that the believing parents of children who die in infancy can have no assurance regarding the election of such children.

The Swiss delegates. In the initial judgment prepared by the Swiss delegates, the following proposition was offered on the subject of the election of children of believers who die in infancy:

That there is an election and reprobation of children, as well as of adults, we cannot deny before God, who mercifully loves and irreprehensibly hates those who are not yet born. But as concerns the children of believers, since God by virtue of the covenant of grace is their God, and since Paul calls them holy who are born of a believing father and/or mother, and since the Lord of heaven declares them heirs of the heavenly kingdom, if they die in their infancy, before the years of discretion, we hope the best of them (*wij hopen van hen het beste*). And we doubt not (*wij twijfelen niet*) that the angels of such children, who are ministering and very loving spirits from their tender youth, who always behold the

¹² *Acta*, p. 348.

face of God, are especially sent out for their sake, and faithfully serve in their office.¹³

Unlike the judgment of the English delegates, the judgment of the Swiss delegates addresses directly the point of the Arminian objection. Contrary to the Arminians' charge, this judgment maintains that believers may hope the best for such children, and also states that they should not doubt that the angels of such children will be sent out for their sake.¹⁴

The Nassau and Wettaravian delegates. The third judgment in the preparatory phase of the Synod of Dort's handling of the First Head of Doctrine that addresses the accusation of the Arminians, is the judgment of the Nassau and Wettaravian delegates. Summarizing the true teaching of the Reformed churches, these delegates presented a brief proposition on the election and salvation of the children of believing parents: "Although it is true that God may condemn children because of original sin, nevertheless, Christian parents must in no wise doubt (*moeten ... geenszins twifelen*) concerning the salvation of their children; for the promise is to them and their children, Gen. 7:7; Mark 10:16; Acts 2:39."¹⁵ Like the judgment of the Swiss delegates, this judgment uses language that calls believing parents not to doubt the salvation of their children. It speaks generally of the salvation of children of believing parents, however, without specifically addressing the issue of such children who die in infancy

The Bremen delegates. Of all the judgments of the synodical delegates that address the Arminian accusation, none is more forthright than that of the Bremen delegates. Among its propositions was the following:

¹³ Paragraph 8, On Predestination, *Acta*, p. 376.

¹⁴ Though we will have occasion to return to Homer Hoeksema's interpretation of these judgments in a subsequent section of this chapter, it is noteworthy that he declares that the Swiss delegates "do not dare to say anything positive and objective about the children of believers who die in infancy" (*The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 271). This comment does not seem to do justice to the rather "objective" claim of the Swiss judgment that God sends his angels to secure their welfare (salvation) on the occasion of their death.

¹⁵ *Acta*, p. 380.

Concerning only the children of believers who die before they are able to understand the teaching, we judge that God loves them, out of that same good pleasure for Christ's sake, through Christ, and in Christ, out of which he loves the adults; therefore, they also, with a view to the covenant, are holy. In order to confirm this, they are initiated by holy baptism and put on Christ.¹⁶

This proposition clearly identifies the particular question that the Arminian accusation raises, namely, the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy. It also affirms without any reservation or qualification that such children are to be regarded as loved by God in Christ. The basis for this confidence is to be found in the covenant of grace, which is signified and sealed to such children in baptism.

Three Dutch professors. The judgment presented to the Synod by three Dutch professors, Polyander, Thysius, and Walleus, expressly addresses the Arminian proposition that there is no election or reprobation of young children. In the opening portion of their judgment, the three Dutch professors maintain that “[t]here is a vast difference in the condition of those little children who are born of non-covenant parents, since Scripture declares the latter to be unclean, alienated from Christ and from the covenant of grace.”¹⁷ After noting that the children of non-covenant parents are alienated from Christ, the judgment goes on to cite several Scripture passages that speak to the different and privileged status of the children of covenant parents (1 Cor. 7:14; Gal. 2:15; Eph. 2:12; Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:39). Upon the basis of the teaching of these passages, the opinion of the three Dutch professors draws a conclusion regarding the election and salvation of such children who die in infancy.

From these passages we conclude that the children of believers who die in their infancy must be reckoned among the elect (*onder*

¹⁶ *Acta*, p. 397. Cf. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 272, who maintains that “even this opinion does not make a flat, objective statement concerning all children of believers who die in infancy.”

¹⁷ *Acta*, p. 606.

de uitverkorenen moeten gerekend worden), since they are graciously delivered from this life by God before they have broken the conditions of his covenant. But concerning the children of unbelievers, who are outside of the church of God, we deem that men ought to leave them committed to God's judgment. For those who are without, God shall judge, 1 Cor. 5:13.¹⁸

In this conclusion, the Dutch professors address the specific accusation of the Arminians, and claim that believers ought to regard their children who die in infancy to be elect. In support of this claim, they adduce an argument from the consideration that such children have not broken the conditions of the covenant and

¹⁸ *Acta*, p. 606. Hoekesma, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 272, terms the statement about not having broken the conditions of the covenant "unsubstantiated." However, it was common among Reformed theologians prior to the Synod of Dort to distinguish between infant children, who were not capable of breaking the covenant and being excluded from its promises, and those who had reached an age of discretion, who were able to break the covenant and forfeit its blessings. For this reason, Zwingli and Bullinger, the leading theologians of the Reformed churches of the Rhineland, and architects of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant, expressed confidence regarding the salvation of such children of believers who died in infancy. Warfield, "The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation," pp. 429-31, appeals to evidence that this was Zwingli's view, but states that he is unaware of any evidence in Bullinger's writings that he taught a similar view, as Phillip Schaff maintains. I believe the evidence for Bullinger's view is found in his great treatise on the covenant, which carefully distinguishes those who are included in the covenant by virtue of their not having or being able to violate its conditions, and those who prove themselves to be "carnal" when they reach "the age of reason" and "neglect the conditions of the covenant." See Heinrich Bullinger, "A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God," in J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980), pp. 106-7, 130-1. On the subject of the infant children of believers who die before they break the covenant, Bullinger writes: "Wherefore we conclude that infants who are born of faithful parents and who die either before they have begun to live or before they could be inscribed among the people of God with the sacred sign of the covenant cannot be damned with the support of this text [Gen. 17:14]. For God is speaking of despisers of the covenant who are adults. ... We believe, moreover, such infants to be saved by the grace and mercy of God ..." (p. 131).

would not, accordingly, be subject to God's judgment on that account. This argument adds to the Scriptural case that is present in the other judgments we have considered thus far. It also testifies to the special focus of their response to the Arminian accusation. Though believers ought to leave the question of the salvation of the children of unbelievers' to God's judgment, they have reason to be confident of the salvation of their own children when they die in infancy without breaking covenant with God.

Sybrandus Lubbertus. In a separate judgment, the Dutch theologian, Lubbertus, indicated his agreement with the opinion of the three Dutch theologians. Lubbertus also added his own opinion, which was subscribed to as well by the three professors. Contrary to the Arminian denial of an election or reprobation of children Lubbertus stated that "Scripture proves this point, Romans 9:7. 'Neither because they are Abraham's seed are they all children'; and verse 6, 'For they are not all Israel, who are out of father Israel.' Besides, the promise belongs to the little children of the Church, Acts 2:29. 'For to you is the promise and to your children.' To the others, who are outside of the Church, there is no promise given."¹⁹ Lubbertus' opinion makes the general point that there is an election and reprobation of children, and that this election and reprobation may even distinguish between children of covenant parents. But it does not speak as directly or affirmatively of the specific question regarding how believing parents should view their children who die in infancy. The reader is left to infer from Lubbertus' reference to Acts 2:39 at the end of his opinion that parents should view these children from the standpoint of the promise of the covenant.

Franciscus Gomarus. In addition to these judgments by several Dutch professors, the Synod also received a judgment from the eminent theologian and opponent of Arminius, Franciscus Gomarus. Against the unscriptural teaching of Grevinchovius, an Arminian theologian, that there is no election of little children since that they have no "foreseen faith," Gomarus observed that

¹⁹ *Acta*, p. 615.

[t]he young (*jonge*) children of those who are in the covenant of God through Christ, and of those who are true believers, we piously believe to be also elect (*gelooven wij Godvruchtelijk, dat mede verkoren zijn*), in case they die before reaching the age of understanding, according to the indication of the formula of the covenant, 'I am your God, and the God of your seed,' Gen. 17 and Acts 2:39. But, in case they arrive at the age of understanding, then we acknowledge that only those who believe in Christ are elect, for these alone are saved according to the gospel.²⁰

Gomarus' judgment, like that of the three Dutch professors, Polyander, Thysius, and Walleus, speaks specifically to the question in dispute. In the particular circumstance of "true believers" whose young children die in infancy, we may piously believe that such children are elect. With the same care for precision in his judgment, Gomarus also makes the point that played a role in the thinking of the other Dutch professors, namely, that these children belong to a special category of persons with whom God covenants, those who in the nature of the case have not irresponsibly (having reached the age of understanding) broken the covenant relationship. The preciseness with which Gomarus defines those children whom believers may regard as elect, allows him at the same time to acknowledge that not all of those with whom God covenants in the covenant of grace are elect.

The delegates from the Particular Synod of South Holland. The judgment presented to the Synod by the particular Synod of South Holland includes an interesting opinion on the subject. Though this opinion encourages believing parents not to doubt the election and salvation of their young children, it also adds a general comment about the possibility of the reprobation of some children of believers. This addition is somewhat unique among all the preliminary judgments on the question that were presented to the Synod.

²⁰ *Acta*, pp. 619-20.

That all young children, by reason of original sin, are subject to everlasting condemnation, and that reprobation may take place even in the case of little children who live and grow up (*bij hun leven en opwassen plaats hebbe*), they [the delegates] hold that holy Scripture and experience testify clearly enough. But whether reprobation may also take place in the case of young children of believers who die in their early childhood before the age of speech, without actual sins (*stervende in hunne jong sprakelooze kindsheid zonder werkelijke zonden*), concerning this they are of the opinion that men should not curiously inquire (*niet nieuwsgieriglijk hebbe te onderzoeken*); but seeing that there are testimonies of Holy Scripture which cut off for believing parents all reason for doubting (*alle oorzaak afsnijden van te twifelen van de verkiezing*) concerning the election and salvation of their young children. Therefore, they hold that men should be at peace and satisfied with this; Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14, and similar passages.²¹

Even though this opinion allows for the possibility of the reprobation of some children of believers who “live and grow up,” it pointedly warns against any speculative conclusion that young children of believers who die in infancy may be among those whom God reprobates. In the special case of such children, parents have no basis whatsoever to doubt their salvation by virtue of their standing as children who are embraced by the promises of the covenant of grace.

The Utrecht delegates. The judgment of the Utrecht delegates speaks at some length on the Scriptural teaching that God elects and reprobates young children, a teaching that the Arminians had expressly denied. In their judgment, however, the Utrecht delegates do not address as directly the particulars of the Arminian objection regarding the reprobation of the young children of believers who die in infancy. No distinction, for example, is drawn between children who die in infancy and others who may reach an age of maturity. Nor is there any direct affirmation regarding how believing parents should regard the election and

²¹ *Acta*, p. 634.

salvation of their children in this circumstance. However, the judgment of the Utrecht delegates does include the argument that the promise of the covenant to the young children “comes from nowhere else than from election unto salvation.”

If there is no election of young children, then there is also no promise of salvation, nor salvation for them. For salvation, and the promise of salvation, comes from nowhere else than from election unto salvation (*Want de zaligheid, en de belofte er van, is nergens anders uit, dan uit de verkiezing ter zaligheid*). Now the promise belongs to young children, ‘I am your God and the God of your seed.’ ‘To you and to your children is the promise’; ‘your children are holy.’ And salvation belongs also to them, ‘Let them come unto me, for such is the kingdom of heaven.’²²

In the opinion of the Utrecht delegates, the assurance of the election of young children derives from the promise of the covenant that is extended to them together with their parents.

The Drenth delegates. The last judgment that we consider is the judgment of the Drenth delegates. In their judgment, the Drenth delegates distinguished carefully between the young children of unbelievers who die in infancy and the young children of believers who die in infancy. Regarding the deceased children of unbelievers, their opinion states that they may be judged to be reprobate; regarding the deceased children of believers, however, their opinion states that the parents of such children can have a “sure hope” of their election.

Here we may say something concerning young children (among whom we also include adults who have been insane from the beginning of their life), namely, concerning those young children who die in their infancy. 1. The little children of unbelievers who die in their infancy we judge to be reprobate; 1 Cor. 7; Rom. 11. Hence the contrary doctrine falls away: 1. the heathen shall be saved if they use the good light of their reason; 2. no one is condemned on account of original sin. But matters stand differently with respect to the young children of believers who

²² *Acta*, p. 655

die in infancy; concerning these we say the following. 1. Little children of believers, even though they die in infancy, can nevertheless be rejected by God, and left in their misery, if God should will to use his right.... 2. Meanwhile believing parents can nevertheless have a sure hope concerning the salvation of such little children (*van de zaligheid van hunne zoodanige jonge kinderen, eene zekere hoop hebben*). For we never read in Scripture that such children were ever reprobated. But on the contrary the same Scripture testifies of the good inclination of God towards such children; Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:39.²³

One noteworthy feature of this judgment was the inclusion of an argument from the absence of any Scriptural testimony that would support the opinion that the children of believers who die in infancy may be reprobate.

These judgments confirm a keen interest and desire among the delegations to respond to the untrue accusation of the Arminian party regarding the election of the children of believers who die in infancy. They illustrate that the delegates wanted the Synod's *Canons* to include a statement regarding the propriety of a positive judgment respecting the election of such children. Though some express their opinion in more unqualified terms than others, most of them ask for a forthright statement that would encourage parents not to doubt the election and salvation of their children in such circumstances.

2. *The Request for Article I/17*

Surprisingly, the first draft of the *Canons* did not include any reference to the election of the young children of believers who die in infancy. Even though many of the initial judgments that were presented before the Synod of Dort included comments on this subject, the committee authorized to prepare a draft of the *Canons* chose not to include an article on it in the first draft. In this respect, the draft *Canons* followed the precedent of an earlier set of *Canons* that had been written by the president of the Synod, Bogerman, and that were among the materials available to the

²³ *Acta*, pp. 689-90.

committee as it prepared its first draft for consideration by the Synod.²⁴ For example, in their comments on Bogerman's earlier draft statement, the Overijssel delegates had argued that it would be appropriate for the synod to address the subject of the election of infant children of the covenant, not only to answer the Arminian complaint but also to lend comfort to believing parents.²⁵

The absence of any comment on the Arminian complaint regarding the Reformed view of election, especially in terms of its implications for the election and salvation of infant children of believers, was bound to provoke some reaction from the various delegations at the Synod. Indeed, in the discussion of the initial judgments of the various delegations to the Synod, a number of delegates had expressed their desire that a statement be included that would address the Arminian complaint. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the delegates strongly advised that such a statement be included in a revised version of the committee's draft *Canons*. The advice of the Swiss delegates captures well the sentiment of these delegates.

We are surprised that nothing at all is decided or defined about the election and reprobation of infants. It certainly seems right to us that regard must be paid to the vileness by which the Remonstrants are accustomed to make the orthodox doctrine of predestination hateful for pregnant women. And clearly there is scarcely anything—experience is witness—which can cause women (especially the feminine sex in childbirth) more hurt than to hear something debated concerning the salvation or damnation of their young. Hence those [apparently other delegations] do not badly—perhaps with good cause—give advice who would grant some moderate and sound (*moderatum et solidum*) canon not only

²⁴ Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, p. 412.

²⁵ Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, p. 412. For a copy of the Swiss request, see Klaas Dijk, *De Strijd over Infra- en Supralapsarisme in de Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1912), Bijlage C, Sibelius (March 12/22).

to assuage the doubt of believing parents about their infants but also to counter the vileness of opponents.²⁶

It is evident that this advice of the Swiss delegates enjoyed the support of many of the delegates, since it became the occasion for the draft committee's subsequent submission of a draft Article I/17 for the consideration of the synod.

3. *The Committee Draft of I/17*

At this point in the story of the formulation of Article I/17, the matter becomes a bit more complicated. In his dissertation on the subject of reprobation at the Synod of Dort, Donald Sinnema calls attention to perhaps the earliest draft of the Article, which was written in the hand of Polyander, a member of the draft committee. In this draft, there is evidence that an early proposal for the Article differed somewhat from the draft that was eventually presented to the Synod. This difference is apparent from the written statement of Polyander, which Sinnema reproduces as follows:

Although, properly speaking, God knows those who are his, ~~2 Tim. 2:19, and we are not to investigate his hidden judgment,~~ nevertheless the Scripture says I Cor. 7:14 [at the end stands an alternative to the preceding words: Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, of which Gen. 17:7, Act. 2:39, I Cor. 7:14 testify] that the children of believers are holy, not according to nature, but by virtue of a gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are comprehended, pious parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls from this life in their infancy, ~~but to believe concerning them from~~ ==== the promises of the covenant that ~~the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. It is so far from being the case that they ought to suppose --~~

²⁶ Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, pp. 412-13. The translation is Sinnema's and is taken from an original source (Zurich, Manuscript B235, fol. 242r.).

-- ~~some of them even from their mother's breast~~ ---- torn and ---
- into the eternal damnation of hell.²⁷

The interesting feature of this hand-written draft of Polyander is that it originally began with a concessive clause (“Although, properly speaking, God knows those who are his”). that might open the door to some uncertainty regarding God’s electing purpose with respect to the infant children of believers. According to the opening language of Polyander’s draft, we must acknowledge that the “hidden judgment” of God remains unknown to us. This “hidden judgment” concerns God’s perfect knowledge of the elect and non-elect, a knowledge to which we do not have access. By calling attention to the “hidden judgment” of God, the language of Polyander’s first draft allowed the possibility of the reprobation of the deceased children of believers within the secret will of God, even though it also encouraged parents not to doubt the election of such children.

Polyander’s handwritten draft of Article I/17, however, reveals that this element of uncertainty, which was present in an early draft of the Article, would soon be removed by the draft

²⁷ Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, p. 413 (quoting from Hague Manuscript I.5.18 [second document]). The translation is mine, and is based upon the following reproduction of Polyander’s handwritten note by Sinnema: “Etsi Deus proprie novit qui sint sui, 2 Tim. 2:19, et de occulte ipsius iudicio nobis non sit scrutandum. tamen cum Scriptura dicat I Cor. 7:14 [at the end stands an alternative to the preceding words: Quandoquidem de voluntate Dei ex verbo ipsius nobis est iudicandum, quod testator Gen. 17:7, Act. 2:39, I Cor. 7:14] liberos fidelium esse sanctos, non quidem natura, sed beneficio foederis gratuiti in quo illi cum parentibus comprehenduntur, pii parentes de electione et salute suorum librorum quos Deus in infantia ===== ex hac vita evocat dubitare non debent, ~~sed credere ad eos~~ ex ===== vi promissionis federalis pertinere regnum caelorum. Tantum abest ut opinari debeant ===== nonnullos ex iis aliquos ab uberibus matrum ===== abripi et ===== in gehennae damnationem aeternam.” Sinnema notes that the conclusion of this draft of Polyander was to reappear in the final form of the *Canons*, in the closing “Rejection of False Accusations.” The adopted form of the *Canons* omits any reference to Matt. 19:14, and places the references to 1 Cor. 7:14, Gen. 17:7, and Acts 2:39 in the margin (though the language of the Article clearly means to allude to these passages).

committee. In the draft committee's eventual recommendation to the Synod, the proposed Article was identical to the present form of Article I/17.²⁸ In this draft proposal to the Synod, the opening phrase of the Article emphasizes that believers make judgments about God's will upon the basis of his revealed Word. No reference is made to the hidden judgment of God. Rather, believing parents are strongly encouraged to be assured of the election and salvation of their children when they die as infants. By emphasizing the positive confidence believing parents may have regarding the election of their infant children, the proposed Article eliminates any possible occasion for uncertainty or doubt on the subject. Remarkably, after this draft proposal was presented to the Synod, the draft committee considered altering its language once more at the request of the delegates from the Reformed churches of the Palatinate. When the draft committee invited responses to their proposed Article, the Palatine delegates stated that "[w]e prefer that the entire formula presented by us before be retained, because concerning God's will it is well-known from his Word that 'not all who are from Israel are of Israel' (Rom. 9:6). There [in the committee's proposal], however, nothing is defined about the first cause, but it remains in the order of secondary causes."²⁹ Despite this request for a change in the Article, which would add a reference to God's "hidden judgment" that had earlier been removed, the Synod ultimately decided to retain the Article in the form in which it was first proposed by the draft committee.

²⁸ In the draft presented to the synod, however, this Article was numbered Article I/18.

²⁹ Sinnema, p. 414 (quoting from Hague Manuscript I.5.15). Sinnema notes that nothing is said to this effect in the original "judgment" (*iudicium*) of the Palatine delegation, though the opinion expressed was held by the Heidelberg theologian, David Pareu, in his *De Amissione Dei*. Sinnema appeals to this request of the Palatines to argue that Article I/17 does not exclude the possibility that some such children of believers might not be reprobate at the level of God's "hidden will." In email correspondence with me, Sinnema indicated that, upon subsequent reflection in response to Gootjes' article, he would now slightly revise this position (6/10/05).

4. *The Final Form of I/17*

Though it might appear unnecessary to rehearse the details of the complicated pre-history of Article I/17, an acquaintance with this history is directly relevant to a proper appreciation for and understanding of the Article as it was finally adopted. Despite the diversity of opinions that were expressed in the judgments of the various delegations, the consensus opinion of the Synod of Dort is expressed in the Article as it has been received by the Reformed churches to this day. In its final form, Article I/17 speaks to the Arminian accusation in clear and forthright terms: believing parents, who are to make judgments about God's will upon the basis of his revealed Word, ought to have no doubt regarding the election and salvation of their infant children whom God calls to himself. Therefore, the accusation of the Arminians, namely, that the Reformed churches teach the reprobation of (some of) these children, is a false one that does not accord with the truth or with charity. The doctrine of election, particularly in respect to the question raised by the Arminians' accusation, supports a robust assurance of God's favor toward his people, including their deceased infant children. This assurance rests solidly upon the basis of what is revealed respecting these children in the Word of God, namely, that they are embraced by the covenant promise in Christ and set apart as holy. Contrary to the advice of some of the delegates, the Synod adopted a form of Article I/17 that deliberately removed any reference to the hidden judgment of God. In doing so, the Synod specifically rejected an opinion of some delegates that would open the door to the inference that some of the deceased infant children of believers may be reprobate. One can only surmise at this point that the Synod's adoption of the final form of Article I/17 was meant to exclude any view that would permit this inference by way of an appeal to the secret will of God.

The Meaning of Article I/17: Two Views among Reformed Interpreters

One of the remarkable features of Article I/17 of the *Canons* is that it does not seem to have provoked any substantial debate throughout the history of the Reformed churches. I am unaware of any specific cases in the history of the Reformed churches in which officebearers were charged with deviating from the teaching of this Article. Though there may be instances of such cases in the history of the Reformed churches, I am not aware of any evidence that they have occurred. The conclusion that seems to follow from the apparent absence of such cases is that the Reformed churches have consistently embraced the teaching of Article I/17, and that there is really no basis for significant disagreement.

Before we draw so sanguine a conclusion, however, we need to consider whether Article I/17 has been uniformly interpreted by Reformed theologians. Despite the relative absence of controversy regarding this Article among the Reformed churches, there is evidence of some differences of opinion. At the risk of oversimplification, these differences express themselves in the form of two distinct interpretations. The first of these interpretations, which might be termed the “stronger” or “positive” one, insists that Article I/17 forthrightly affirms the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. The second of these interpretations, which might be termed the “weaker” or “subjective” one, argues that Article I/17 only speaks of the attitude or hope that believing parents should have with respect to their infant children.³⁰

³⁰ Gootjes, “Can Parents Be Sure?,” p. 2, characterizes these two views nicely, when he notes that the first takes the Article to “determine the salvation of these infants,” and the second takes it to “determine [only] the attitude of the parents.” While the language could be misleading, one could speak of the first as the “objective,” and the second as the “subjective” reading of Article 17. Opinions differ as to the historical consensus of Reformed theologians on the subject of the election of the deceased infant children of believers. Cf. Warfield, “The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation,” pp. 429-38,

1. *A Declaration of Certainty*

The first interpretation of Article I/17 claims that its encouragement to believing parents is rooted in a confident judgment that their children who die in infancy are elect and saved. On this reading of Article I/17, doubt regarding the election and salvation of such children is vigorously excluded. Though advocates of this view acknowledge that Article I/17 is expressed in a pastoral form, encouraging parents “not to doubt” the election and salvation of such children, they emphasize that the confidence expressed in the Article could not be sustained if this were only a kind of “subjective” hope on the part of such parents. There are several arguments that have been set forth to defend this interpretation.

First, this interpretation has the sanction of a long-standing tradition of interpretation, and is often represented in commentaries on the *Canons of Dort*. As we noted in our summary of the various judgments of the delegations at the *Synod of Dort*, several of them are formulated in a manner that forthrightly affirm the election and salvation of the deceased children of believing parents. This is true in the case of the judgments of the Swiss, the Bremen, the Utrecht, and the Drenth delegations, and is the position defended in the judgments of the five Dutch professors at the Synod. These judgments provide evidence that a strong, if not prevalent, opinion of the delegations at the Synod of Dort favored a ringing testimony to the election of such children. Moreover, in their comments on this Article, many Reformed theologians have

who argues that this is the prevalent Reformed view; and Herman Bavinck. *The Last Things: Hope for this World and the Next* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 165, who claims that “[t]he Reformed were inclined to believe that all children who were born in the covenant of grace and died before reaching the age of discretion attained to blessedness in heaven, though in this connection as well many of them made a distinction between elect and reprobate children and did not dare to attribute salvation with certainty to each of these children individually.” No doubt there is a diversity of opinion on the question among Reformed theologians. The first or objective reading of Article I/17, however, insists that the *Canons of Dort* gave confessional expression to the prevalent view.

taken it to be a straightforward affirmation of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. For example, in 1818 Thomas Scott wrote that “[t]he salvation of the offspring of believers, dying in infancy, is here scripturally stated, and not limited to such as are baptized.”³¹ In his commentary on the *Canons*, which was written early in the twentieth century, M. Meijering summarizes his discussion of Article I/17 with the following statement: “When God-fearing parents cry over their precious gifts they could only briefly enjoy having, they may look up together and remind one another: Our children were fruits early ripe for heaven. And with this they can comfort one another.”³² Among these commentators, it is observed that the language, “ought not to doubt,” is a *litotes*. Though this language expresses the matter negatively, it intends to express a positive sentiment. Accordingly, one commentator observes:

We have to take the words “ought not to doubt” as a *litotes*. That is a figure of speech seemingly diminishing the meaning but in fact used to strengthen it. “He is not a fool” means in fact: “He is very smart”. We must therefore take “ought not to doubt” as “must be firmly assured”. Believing parents must be firmly assured over the election and salvation of their children who died in infancy.³³

These comments attest the presence of a tradition of commentary on Article I/17 that understands it to express, albeit negatively

³¹ *The Articles of the Synod of Dort, Translated from the Latin, with Notes* (reprint; Harrisburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1993), p. 270.

³² M. Meijering, *De Dordtsche Leerregels* (Groningen: Jan Haan, 1924), p. 82.

³³ Joh. Francke, “Zijn de kinderen der gelovigen, die God in hun kindsheid uit dit leven wegnemt, wedergeboren?”, *De Reformatie* 44/42 (1969), p. 330. See also H. Kake, *De Doop in de Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, pp. 162-8; T. Bos, *De Dordtsche Leerregelen* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1915), pp. 66-76; Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.), pp. 6-12; C. den Boer, “*Om ‘t eeuwig welbeghagen*” (Utrecht: Be Banier, 1974), pp. 79-82; C. Trimp, in *The Bride’s Treasure* (Launceston: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australian, 1979), p. 55.

and pastorally, a strong certainty regarding the election and salvation of the deceased children of believing parents.³⁴

Second, the strong interpretation of Article I/17 also appeals to the particular occasion for the formulation of Article I/17.³⁵ This occasion was the Arminian accusation that the Reformed view taught the reprobation of some (not necessarily, all) children of believing parents who die in infancy. The purpose of the formulation of Article I/17 is to offer a rebuttal or answer to this accusation that would prove it to be false and baseless. If sufficient weight is given to this occasion for the formulation of Article I/17, it hardly seems possible that its authors only intended to speak to the attitude of believing parents in such circumstances. If the Article only encouraged a subjective hope that such children were elect, though all the while granting the real possibility that some among them were reprobate, it hardly seems to provide an answer to the Arminian accusation. Indeed, a weak reading of Article I/17, which would allow for the possibility of the reprobation of such children within the secret will of God, would lend support to, perhaps even confirm, the validity of the

³⁴ For interpretations of Article I/17 that either take this view or express similarly strong sentiments, see also H. Kake, *De Doop in de Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, pp. 162-8; T. Bos, *De Dordtsche Leerregelen* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1915), pp. 66-76; Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.), pp. 6-12; C. den Boer, *“Om ‘t eeuwig welbeghagen”* (Utrecht: Be Banier, 1974), pp. 79-82; C. Trimp, in *The Bride’s Treasure* (Launceston: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australian, 1979), p. 55; J. G. Vos, *The Covenant of Grace* (Pittsburg, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, n.d.), pp. 21-4.

³⁵ Gootjes, “Can Parents Be Sure?” pp. 2-6, lists five “reasons” that Article I/17 should be read as an expression of certainty regarding the election of these infants: (1) only a statement of certainty would answer the Arminian accusation; (2) the insistence of the various delegations that the Synod include a positive, forthright statement on the matter; (3) an evasive answer would not have satisfied the request of the delegations for a positive statement; (4) the draft presented by the committee to the Synod initially included Matthew 19:14 as a proof text; and (5) the wording of the text of Article I/17. Though there is some overlapping between Gootjes’ “reasons” and the arguments I identify, my summary follows a different sequence than Gootjes’ and combines his second and third reasons for the sake of clarity.

Arminian accusation. In this weaker reading of the Article, the Arminian claim that some of these deceased infant children were reprobate would be closer to the truth than the vigorous rejection of this accusation in the *Canons* intimates. The only answer that would prove the falsity of the Arminian accusation would be one that positively affirmed the election and salvation of such covenant children.

Third, we have already observed that the various delegations to the Synod of Dort presented their judgments on the Arminian accusation. Though these judgments reflect a spectrum of opinion on this accusation, most of them called for a positive statement that would affirm the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy. The strong desire for such an affirmative statement is evident from the fact that Article I/17 was unanimously approved by the Synod for inclusion in the final form of the *Canons*. In the form that was approved, no uncertainty is cast upon the affirmation of the election of such children, even though the Palatine delegation asked for the inclusion of a sentence that referred to the secret will of God and left room from that standpoint for the inference that some deceased infant children of believers might be reprobate. The sentiments expressed in the judgments of some of the delegations, however, called for a much more definite and less evasive answer to the Arminian accusation. The final form of Article I/17 provides such a definite answer. In the light of these considerations, it does not seem probable that the Synod would have been satisfied with an answer that would allow the possible inference that some of these children were ultimately reprobate within the secret will of God.³⁶ The latter inference seems inconsistent with Article I/17's

³⁶ Though I do not cite it as a separate ground for this view, it should be remembered that some of these judgments especially emphasized the fact that these children were not in a position to break the covenant. Though some with whom God covenants may break the covenant and come under its sanctions, this circumstance does not apply in the case of children of believers who die in infancy. J. G. Vos, *The Covenant of Grace*, p. 23, stresses this point in his consideration of the question: "It is true that some of the children of believing parents are not of the elect, and turn out to be covenant-breakers. But an infant

insistence that we are to make judgments about the matter upon the basis of the Word of God and the promise of the covenant of grace.

Fourth, the “Rejection of False Accusations” at the conclusion of the *Canons* declares emphatically that the Arminian accusation is false. To appreciate the significance of this claim, it needs to be remembered that this accusation is characterized as charging the Reformed churches with the teaching that “many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mother’s breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism can be of any use to them.” Since Article I/17 purports to be a sufficient answer to this accusation, it can scarcely be interpreted weakly to permit the view that some of these infant children may in fact be reprobate. The point of the closing “Rejection of False Accusations” is that the Arminian accusation was a false and uncharitable misstatement of the Reformed view. However, if Article I/17 were stating something less than a certain affirmation of the election of these children, the Arminian accusation could hardly be declared false or untrue. If any room were left for believing parents to be unsure of the election of their children who die in infancy, the Arminian accusation would retain its punch.

And fifth, the pastoral form of Article I/17 does not mean that it falls short of a positive affirmation of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. Though it is alleged, as we shall note below, that the language “ought not to doubt” speaks only to the subjective attitude such parents may have in the circumstance of the death of their infant children, this language is used because it answers precisely to the form of the Arminian accusation. The accusation of the Arminians was not simply that these children may be reprobate. Rather, the

that dies before reaching years of discretion cannot be a covenant-breaker; it cannot despise and violate the obligation of the Covenant of Grace. Therefore we have the best of reasons for believing that all children of believing parents dying in infancy are not only within the Covenant of Grace, but also of the number of the elect and shall certainly be saved.”

accusation was that believing parents could have no assurance of the salvation of their infant children because they might be reprobate within the secret will and purpose of God. Because this was the nature of the Arminian accusation, it was in order for the Synod of Dort to adopt a statement that spoke directly to the confidence parents may have in this circumstance. A simple statement of the truth, namely, that such children are elect, would not suffice to answer the pointed complaint of the Arminians. N. H. Gootjes summarizes this argument well, when he observes that

Canons of Dort I, 17 does not fall short of certainty, rather, it moves beyond a statement of fact by directly addressing the situation of the parents. It begins by pointing out the certainty that their children are holy in virtue of the covenant of grace. Then it turns to the parents to comfort them on this basis that they ought not to doubt. Rather, they should trust the words of God: 1 Cor. 7:14, Gen. 17:7 and Acts 2:39. It is radically against the intention of this confession to use the practical direction of this statement to undermine the certainty of the doctrine. The parents are comforted on that [sic] basis that God himself promised salvation. Before the certainty of God's promises the doubt of parents melts away.³⁷

For these reasons, rather than leave uncertain the election and salvation of such children, the first interpretation of the pastoral word of Article I/17 insists that nothing less than a certain affirmation of their election could enjoin upon believing parents the duty to be confident in this circumstance.

2. A Declaration of Attitude

Despite the arguments often mustered for an interpretation that Article I/17 expresses a strong certainty regarding the election of the deceased children of believing parents, there are some interpreters who take a different, weaker view. In the opinion of these interpreters, Article I/17 stops short of

³⁷ Gootjes, "Can Parents Be Sure?," p. 5.

expressing a positive certainty regarding the election and salvation of such children. According to this weaker reading of Article I/17, believing parents are encouraged to have a good hope that their infant children are elect, but this is not tantamount to an affirmation of their election within God's secret will and purpose. Article I/17 speaks to the "attitude" that believing parents should cultivate in the circumstance of the death of their infant children. But it does not purport to speak objectively of the election and salvation of such children.

Though this interpretation of Article I/17 seems to have fewer advocates than the strong interpretation that we have already considered, it does have some able and clear advocates. Among the advocates of this interpretation, the Protestant Reformed writers, Herman Hoeksema and Homer Hoeksema, have presented a fairly vigorous argument for a more subjective reading of the Article. In this reading, Article I/17 encourages believing parents to have hope respecting the salvation of their children who die in infancy, but this hope is a "subjective" attitude that leaves open the question of the status of such children within the hidden judgment of God.

Herman Hoeksema's comments on this Article are surprisingly critical. After acknowledging the important pastoral and historical occasion for the inclusion of the Article in the final form of the *Canons*, Hoeksema nonetheless observes that "[t]he article leaves much to be desired as far as clarity and sharpness of definition are concerned; and it cannot be denied that in the form in which the matter is here cast it really cannot be considered an item for a confession."³⁸ The reason Hoeksema judges the Article to be inappropriate for a confessional statement is that it does not express "a definite view concerning the salvation of children who die in infancy."³⁹ If the Article had expressed such a definite view, it would not have spoken of how believing parents "ought not to doubt the election and salvation" of their children, but would have

³⁸ *Believers and Their Seed* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1971), p. 149.

³⁹ *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 149.

positively affirmed “that the children of believers whom God takes away in their infancy are saved according to their election.”⁴⁰ While he acknowledges that many interpreters take this definite view, Hoeksema is convinced that the Article speaks only to the attitude of parents in this circumstance and “does not express an objective item of faith . . .”⁴¹ Hoeksema also notes that the Article provides no help to parents who may have reason to be unsure as to whether their children belong to the category of infants or whether they may have reached the age of discretion. As he describes the teaching of this Article, the definition of such infants remains “rather elastic” and undetermined.⁴²

In addition to the subjectivity and uncertainty that characterize the language of the Article, Hoeksema adds another argument against taking it as a definite statement about the election of the children of believers. Since we know from the Scriptures (Romans 9) that not all of the seed of the covenant or those who fall within the “sphere” of the covenant are elect, we cannot infer from the apparent covenant status of such children that they are elect and saved according to the sovereign will of God. “From their being in God’s covenant by reason of birth from believing parents the salvation of infants does not simply follow as a necessary conclusion.”⁴³ Upon the basis of these considerations, and his rejection of the kinds of Scriptural texts that are often cited to support Article I/17, Hoeksema concludes that “such a general proposition cannot be expressed.”⁴⁴ The most the church

⁴⁰ *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 149.

⁴¹ *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 150.

⁴² *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 150. Hoeksema cites the example of children as young as seven or eight years of age who can give a credible expression of faith in Jesus Christ. This argument from the uncertainty as to who is an “infant” according to the language of I/17 seems to me an abstraction from the concrete circumstance that is being addressed. The language of “infants” in this Article is clarified in the closing “Rejection of False Accusations,” which speaks of the “infant children” of believers who are “in their innocence snatched from their mother’s breasts.”

⁴³ *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 153.

⁴⁴ In addition to the texts cited by the delegates to the Synod of Dort (Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Mark 10; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14), Herman

could say on the question addressed in Article I/17 is that “the Lord saves *His seed* out of our seed.”⁴⁵

Homer Hoeksema’s discussion of Article I/17 in his *The Voice of Our Fathers* is very similar to that of Herman Hoeksema. He also argues that the “negative and subjective viewpoint” of the Article confirms that it only speaks to the attitude of believing parents in the circumstance of the death of their infant children.⁴⁶ Since the Article does not express a definite conviction regarding what the church “believes concerning the truth of God’s Word according to the Scriptures, Homer Hoeksema concludes that it is “of little doctrinal or confessional value.”⁴⁷ Unlike Herman Hoeksema, who bases his discussion almost entirely upon the text of Article I/17, Homer Hoeksema appeals to the judgments of the various delegations at the Synod of Dort. According to him, these judgments confirm that it was not the intention of the delegates to the Synod to express a definite conviction regarding the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy. Some of these judgments speak in explicitly subjective terms, affirming the “good hope” that parents may have in this circumstance. Others acknowledge the Scriptural teaching that “the lines of election and reprobation are carried through also in regard to

Hoeksema notes that some proponents of the election of such children appeal (inappropriately, in his view) to passages like 2 Sam. 12:15-23 and 1 Kings 14:12-13.

⁴⁵ *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 158. In view of the force with which Hoeksema writes against Article I/17, it is interesting to observe that his unhappiness with this Article never became a significant issue in the Protestant Reformed Churches. It should also be observed that Hoeksema’s opinion has no official standing in the Protestant Reformed Churches. For example, in a response to a letter to the editor in *The Standard Bearer* (Feb. 15, 1991), pp. 223-4, David Engelsma expressed his disagreement with the view of Herman Hoeksema. According to Engelsma, who writes as a professor at the seminary of the Protestant Reformed Churches, the point of Article I/17 “is not that godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children who die in infancy, but it is understandable and permissible that they doubt anyway. They *may not* doubt. They are *obliged* not to doubt.”

⁴⁶ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 276.

⁴⁷ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 277.

infants,” and thereby acknowledge that some children of believers may be reprobate according to God’s hidden judgment.⁴⁸ In summarizing his view, Homer Hoeksema identifies four considerations that support a subjective interpretation of Article I/17: (1) the primary point of doctrine that is affirmed against the Arminian view is the Scriptural teaching of the election and reprobation of infants, not the “narrow question of the salvation of children of believers who die in infancy”;⁴⁹ (2) not one of the judgments of the various delegations expresses “a purely objective and Scripturally established statement in regard to the salvation of infants of believers who die at an early age”;⁵⁰ (3) the Scripture passages appealed to in the judgments of the delegates to the Synod (Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Mark 10; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14) do not teach that all the children of believing parents who die in infancy are elect; and (4) the judgments of the delegations to the Synod of Dort prove that “the Synod by no means intended to express as a hard and fast ecclesiastical statement of doctrine that all children of believing parents who die in infancy are elect and are saved on the basis of the testimony of Scripture, but that the Synod exactly avoided such a statement.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 270.

⁴⁹ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 276.

⁵⁰ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 276. In our discussion of these statements above, we had occasion to point out that this description by Homer Hoeksema is not an adequate representation of their teaching.

⁵¹ *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p. 277. Though I have cited several passages from the writings of two prominent Protestant Reformed theologians on Article I/17, it should be noted that this “subjective” view is similar to the view that is often expressed within the tradition of the Netherlands Reformed Churches. For a defense of this view by a (Heritage) Netherlands Reformed theologian, see Joel Beeke, “Children Dying in Infancy: Young People Ask ... (9),” *The Banner of Truth* (January, 1988), pp. 22-3. Beeke appeals to the judgments of some of the delegations at Dort to argue that “they did not believe that each particular child dying in infancy of believing parents would enter into glory.” According to Beeke, Article I/17 affirms merely that God “normally” works salvation along covenantal lines, though there may be “Esau’s” among the deceased infant children of believers.

Further comments on this subjective interpretation of the teaching of Article I/17 are reserved for the conclusion of this article. Though our view coincides with the former interpretation, which maintains that the Article forthrightly affirms the election of the deceased infant children of believers, the position and arguments of Herman and Homer Hoeksema illustrate the existence of this second, “subjective” interpretation of Article I/17.

Article I/17 and The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Comparison

Before we conclude this essay, it would be well to consider a question that is seldom broached in discussions of Article I/17: What difference, if any, is there between the affirmation of Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort* and the affirmation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 10.3? In chapter 10.3 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the Westminster divines affirmed that “[e]lect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.” Upon an initial reading of the language of chapter 10.3, it appears that it might be addressing the same question that is addressed in Article I/17 of the *Canons*. Since both confessions are making affirmations about the election of infants who die in their infancy, there seems to be an obvious overlap between them. Since both of these confessional statements express the common faith of the Reformed churches, some comment is in order regarding the relation and compatibility between them.

Though we could explore this subject at some length, we will restrict our discussion to comments regarding the dissimilarities and similarities of these two confessional statements.

1. Dissimilarities

The most obvious dissimilarity between these two confessional statements is that they address quite different questions. In our analysis of Article I/17 of the Canons, we emphasized that it was written to answer a false accusation of the Arminians. According to this Arminian objection to the doctrine of election, the Reformed view undermined any possible basis for believing parents to be assured of the election and salvation of their children who die in infancy. Article I/17 answers this objection by stressing that the basis for assurance in these circumstances is the revealed will of God in Scripture. The statement in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, though it speaks about the election of infants, addresses a very different question. Chapter 10 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, deals with the subject of “effectual calling.” In the first article of chapter 10, the WCF affirms that effectual calling occurs in the lives of those whom God has predestined to life, and that it ordinarily takes place through the means of Christ’s Word and Spirit. Within this setting, the interest of WCF 10.3 is to explain how “elect infants,” who are unable to make use of the “ordinary means” for effectual calling, are nonetheless able to be saved according to God’s purpose and will. The answer of the WCF 10.3 is that all are saved by virtue of God’s electing purpose, though in the case of elect infants who die in infancy, their salvation is effected by the Spirit of regeneration in an extraordinary manner.

In addition to this fundamental dissimilarity between the two confessional statements, there is another that is of lesser significance. Article I/17 of the Canons treats only the issue of the election of covenant children who die in infancy. It does not speak to, nor does it even warrant any inferences regarding, the subject of the possible election of the infant children of non-believing, non-covenantal parents. The only persons in view in this Article are the children of believing or godly parents whom God calls out of this life in their infancy. By contrast, the statement in WCF 10.3 describes a more general category of persons, namely, all elect infants who die in infancy, whether as the children of

believing or of unbelieving parents. Though there is room to debate whether WCF 10.3 makes any positive affirmation regarding the election and salvation of the deceased, infant children of non-believing parents, it approaches the subject of children who die in infancy in a broad and general manner.⁵² However, there is no room for debate whether Article I/17 of the Canons makes any positive affirmation regarding the election and salvation of all children who die as infants. It clearly does not. Nothing in Article I/17 speaks to this subject one way or the other. By comparison, the WCF 10.3 does open the door to the inference that, if any of the children of non-believing parents who die in infancy are elect, they will undoubtedly be saved, though without the use of the ordinary means.

2. Similarities

If sufficient attention is paid to the different questions that are addressed by Article I/17 of the Canons and chapter 10.3 of the WCF, there does not appear to be any basis for claiming that they are in any way contradictory. Each confession addresses the issue of the election of deceased infants from a different perspective, but neither makes any affirmation that is inconsistent with the other. This is evident from the similarities that can also be detected between them.

⁵² Consequently, some Presbyterian theologians who hold to WCF 10.3 have argued that it permits (though without positively asserting) the position that all deceased infants, whether born of believing or non-believing parents, are elect and therefore saved. See Warfield, "The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation," pp. 429-44. Article I/17 of the *Canons* does not speak directly to the question of the possible election of some or all children of non-believing parents. As Warfield himself acknowledges, the *Canons*, though they positively teach the certain election of all deceased infant children of believers, are "agnostic" on the question of the election or non-election of the deceased infant children of non-believers (p. 435). J. G. Vos, *The Covenant of Grace*, p. 24, argues correctly that by its silence on the question the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 10.3 does not support the assertion that there is a class of "non-elect infants dying in infancy."

The most significant similarity between these two confessional statements is their common teaching about God's sovereign election of his people. The basic assumption of both confessional statements is that salvation or non-salvation depends ultimately upon God's sovereign and merciful election of some persons and not others. That children who die in their infancy are saved can only be ascribed to God's electing grace and purpose toward them in Christ. Neither confession permits the idea that such children are saved because of their innocence, or because of anything that is in them or that they have done. Salvation for all persons, whether they die as children in their infancy or they live to a ripe old age, wholly depends upon God's sovereign choice. On this fundamental, biblical and Reformed teaching, these confessional statements fully concur.

Though it is a more subtle similarity, it should also be observed that both confessional statements concur in their assumption that the deceased children of believing parents are not excluded from salvation by virtue of their inability to make use of the ordinary means of salvation. In the case of the WCF 10.3, this point is explicitly addressed and affirmed. In the case of Article I/17 of the Canons, this point may be inferred. If believing parents may be confident of the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy, they may also be confident that such children are able to enter the kingdom by virtue of their new birth through the Spirit of regeneration. God's electing purpose is invincible, and will be effected upon the basis of Christ's mediatorial work and the Spirit's application of that work to all the elect. Here, too, both of these confessional statements are built upon fundamental biblical and Reformed tenets that are more fulsomely stated in other sections of their respective confessions.

The implication of the dissimilarities and similarities between these two respective confessional statements seems clear. Because these two statements do not contradict each other, a Reformed believer can in good conscience affirm both without fear of inconsistency. However, because these two statements address quite distinct questions from different points of view, it is also

possible that a Reformed believer who subscribes to WCF 10.3 might not be prepared to subscribe to Article I/17. For what is expressly affirmed in Article I/17 is not expressly affirmed or necessarily implied in WCF 10.3. All Reformed believers, however, whether they hold to the *Canons of Dort* or the WCF, must agree with the affirmation of WCF 10.3 that “elect infants who die in infancy” are regenerated without the ordinary use of the means of grace. Or, to express the matter differently, WCF 10.3 expresses a truth that is common to the confessions of the Reformed churches, namely, that salvation for any person depends entirely upon God’s sovereign and electing grace. Article I/17, by comparison, expresses a truth that is particular to the *Canons of Dort* and constitutes one of its unique contributions to the Reformed confession of sovereign election.

Concluding Observations

We observed in our introduction that Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort* represents a striking illustration of the character of the Reformed teaching about election. Though this Article has been relatively neglected in historical treatments of the *Canons* and the Reformed view of God’s electing purpose in Christ, it provides an important example of the Reformed view, which stresses the themes of God’s honor as the Savior of his people and the believer’s comfort in his gracious favor. We have also sought to provide a careful description of the synodical proceedings that led to its adoption in its present form. Though the Article must be interpreted strictly in terms of its adopted text, an acquaintance with these proceedings provides a helpful framework for interpreting the language it uses. In my judgment, there are three general conclusions that are warranted by the evidence that we have considered in this study.

First, any interpretation of Article I/17 requires careful attention to the precise question that it answers. Unless this question is properly defined, we will not be in a position to determine accurately what is affirmed in this Article. The question that Article I/17 addresses is not merely the general question

whether God elects or reprobates infants, though this was denied by the Arminians and affirmed by the Reformed delegates to the Synod of Dort. Nor is Article I/17 addressed to the general question whether there may be elect as well as non-elect persons with whom God covenants in the covenant of grace. The judgments of the various delegations to the Synod of Dort indicate that there was a general consensus among those present that not all of the children of believing parents are elect. The opinions of these delegations include, for example, references to Romans 9, which teaches that some children of believing parents, like Esau, may be reprobate within the will and purpose of God. But these general points of biblical and Reformed teaching were not the specific focus of Article I/17.⁵³ Rather than speaking broadly to these kinds of questions, Article I/17 answers specifically a question regarding the election and salvation of the children of believing parents whom God calls out of this life in their infancy. As some of the judgments of the delegates are careful to observe, God did not will that these children should live and grow to an age of discretion. They are children who, in the nature of the case, were not in a position to break the gracious covenant that God had established with them and their parents. The persons whose election and salvation is addressed in Article I/17 are a special class of persons within the framework of the covenant of grace. The Arminian accusation was that the parents of such children could not be certain of their salvation, since they might well be reprobate within the secret will of God. The great question, and

⁵³ For a treatment of the general Reformed consensus on the relation between sovereign election and the covenant of grace, including an acknowledgement that God's purpose of election does not embrace all believers and their children with whom God covenants in the covenant of grace, see Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pp. 234-67, esp. 258-67; and my "Covenant Theology and Baptism," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), pp. 201-29, esp. 210-215.

the only question, to which Article I/17 speaks, then, is the question whether believing parents may be confident of the election and salvation of these children.

Second, if we bear in mind the specific question to which Article I/17 provides an answer, we will hardly be able to escape the conclusion that it amounts to nothing less than a definite statement of the election and salvation of these children. The arguments that have been set forth in support of what I have termed the “stronger” reading of Article I/17 all concur at this point. Only a strong affirmation of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy provides a satisfactory answer to the Arminian objection summarized in the Canons’ closing “Rejection of False Accusations.” Article I/17 would be an evasion of that accusation, if it only encouraged a “strong presumption” or “hope” that such children are elect within the purpose of God. Even a strong, hopeful attitude that such children are elect leaves the door open to the possibility that they are not elect. But this would be tantamount to granting the truth of the Arminian complaint, namely, that the Reformed view provides believing parents no reason to be confident of the election of such children.

The principal objection to the “weaker” view of Article I/17, is that it *abstracts* from the particular question to which this Article answers. The weaker view, which claims that Article I/17 only encourages believing parents to have a good hope regarding the election of their children, opens the door to a speculative appeal to the secret will and judgment of God that would invariably undermine any such hope. The argument for this view emphasized that God’s electing will ultimately distinguishes between some children of believers who are genuinely recipients of the covenant promise (election) and others who are not (reprobation). It also observed that some children of believing parents grow up and fall away in unbelief and disobedience, and that this accords with the sovereign purposes of God. When proponents of the weaker view apply these general truths taught in Scripture to the particular persons who are envisioned in Article I/17, they conclude that Article I/17 could not be a positive affirmation of the election and

salvation of such children. The problem with this line of reasoning is that *it undermines any possible basis for assurance, not only in the case of the deceased infant children of believers, but also in the case of any believer.* By opening the door to a measure of doubt regarding the salvation of such children by appealing to the secret judgment of God, this approach unavoidably opens the door to a similar procedure in the case of any believer's assurance of salvation.⁵⁴ This line of speculative reasoning is expressly precluded by the opening phrase of I/17, when it states that we "must make judgments about God's will from his Word." The way of assurance for believing parents set forth in Article I/17 is the *same* way of assurance that all believers must follow, lest the assurance of election and salvation be no more than a hopeful attitude regarding what may probably (or possibly) be the case. When Article I/17 says that we must make judgments about the election and salvation of such children upon the basis of God's revealed Word, it reflects a long-standing Reformed conviction that the revealed Word of God in the gospel is the "mirror of election," and the principal basis for the assurance believers may have of God's favor.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The Reformed confessions consistently teach that believers may have an assurance of their election, which is based principally upon the revealed promise of the gospel. See e.g. the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7; the *Canons of Dort*, V/10 ; and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 18. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* even speaks of an "infallible assurance," which can only be based upon "the divine truth of the promises of the gospel." Any introduction of a speculative consideration regarding the secret judgment of God could only undermine such assurance, not only in the case of the infant children of believing parents who die in infancy, but also in the case of any believer. Cf. my "The Doctrine of the Sacraments and Baptism in the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 11 (2000), p. 178, fn.: "The argument of the Canons is that, if our knowledge of God's grace toward us in Christ is based upon the Word and sacraments, and not upon some impossible insight into the particulars of the divine decree, then we have an adequate basis for confidence regarding the salvation of the children of believing parents."

⁵⁵ For this reason, Reformed theologians often use the language of Christ as the "mirror" of the believer's election. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.xxiv.5: "But if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in

And third, our treatment of Article I/17 confirms one of the characteristic features of the doctrine of election in the *Canons of Dort*. In the specific case of the deceased children of believing parents, the authors of the *Canons* desired a clear statement of assurance that would comfort such parents and belie the false accusation of the Arminian party. Despite the Arminian charge that the doctrine of election can only undermine the assurance of salvation, the affirmation of Article I/17 declares that, in the death of infant children of believers, God's sovereign and merciful election is the only solid basis for assurance regarding their salvation. For such children to be saved, God must love them in and for the sake of Christ. Indeed, no one is saved whom God does not graciously choose to save in Christ. This holds true for children as much as for adults. As members of the fallen race in Adam, the children of believers whom God calls out of this life in infancy are saved solely by virtue of God's gracious favor. Far from intimating any uncertainty or doubt respecting the assurance of their election, this Article declares an assurance that is securely founded upon the biblical and Reformed teaching regarding election. In doing so, it illustrates what we noted at the outset of this essay: the biblical and Reformed teaching regarding election serves to safeguard the singular honor of God who sovereignly and graciously saves his people in Christ, and to undergird the believer's confidence in his gracious and invincible favor.

ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election." For a similar emphasis in Heinrich Bullinger, see his *The Decades of Heinrich Bullinger* (reprint: Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004 [1849-52]), 3:187-8.