

Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God and the Manner Thereof

Canons of Dordrecht

Third & Fourth Heads of Doctrine

Article 1

Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.

Article 2

Man after the fall begat children in his own likeness. A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring. Hence all the posterity of Adam, Christ only excepted, have derived corruption from their original parent, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature.

Article 3

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation.

Article 4

There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

Article 5

In the same light are we to consider the law of the Decalogue, delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin and more and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.

Article 6

What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament.

Article 7

This mystery of His will God discovered to but a small number under the Old Testament; under the New (the distinction between various peoples having been removed) He reveals Himself too many, without any distinction of people. The cause of this dispensation is not to be ascribed to the superior worth of one nation above another, nor to their making a better use of the light of nature, but results wholly from the sovereign good pleasure and unmerited love of God. Hence they to whom so great and so gracious a blessing is communicated, above their desert, or rather notwithstanding their demerits, are bound to acknowledge it with humble and grateful hearts, and with the apostle to adore, nor curiously to pry into the severity and justice of God's judgments displayed to others, to whom this grace is not given.

Article 8

As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him.

Article 9

It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves, some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life; others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the Word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit. This our Savior teaches in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13).

Article 10

But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son, that they may show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvelous light, and may glory, not in themselves, but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.

Article 11

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.

Article 12

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that after God has performed His part it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by wirtue of that grace received.

Article 13

The manner of this operation cannot be fully comprehended by believers in this life. Notwithstanding which, they rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with a heart, and love their Savior.

Article 14

Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should by the exercise of his own free will consent to the terms of salvation and actually believe in Christ, but because He who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also.

Article 15

God is under no obligation to confer this grace upon any; for how can He be indebted to man, who had no previous gifts to bestow, as a foundation for such recompense? Nay, who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood? He therefore who becomes the subject of this grace owes eternal gratitude to God, and gives Him thanks forever. Whoever is not made partaker thereof is either altogether regardless of these spiritual gifts and satisfied with his own condition, or is in no apprehension of danger and vainly boasts the possession of that which he has not. With respect to those who make an

external profession of faith and live regular lives, we are bound, after the example of the apostle, to judge and speak of them in the most favorable manner. For the secret recesses of the heart are unknown to us. And as to others, who have not yet been called, it is our duty to pray for them to God, who calls the things that are not as if they were. But we are in no wise to conduct ourselves towards them with haughtiness, as if we had made ourselves to differ.

Article 16

But as man by the fall did not cease to be a creature endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin which pervaded the whole race of mankind deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death; so also this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor takes away their will and its properties, neither does violence thereto; but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it; that were carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign, in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist. Wherefore, unless the admirable Author of every good work wrought in us, man could have no hope of recovering from his fall by his own free will, by the abuse of which, in a state of innocence, he plunged himself into ruin.

Article 17

As the almighty operation of God whereby He prolongs and supports this our natural life does not exclude, but requires, the use of means, by which God of His infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert His influence, so also the wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul. Wherefore, as the apostles and teachers who succeeded them piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory, and the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline; so, even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together. For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen.

The true doctrine having been explained, the Synod *rejects* the errors of those:

Error 1

Who teach that it cannot properly be said that original sin in itself suffices to condemn the whole human race, or to deserve temporal and eternal punishment.

Rejection

For these contradict the apostle, who declares:

Therefore as though one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned. Romans 5:12

And:

The judgment came of one unto condemnation. Romans 5:16

And:

The wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23

Error 2

Who teach that the spiritual gifts, or the good qualities and virtues, such as goodness, holiness, righteousness, could not belong to the will of man when he was first created, and that these, could not have been separated therefrom in the fall.

Rejection

For such is contrary to the description of the image of God which the apostle gives in Ephesians 4:24:

And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Ephesians 4:24

where he declares that it consists in righteousness and holiness, which undoubtedly belong to the will.

Error 3

Who teach that in spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will in itself has never been corrupted, but only hindered through the darkness of the understanding and the irregularity of the affections; and that, these hindrances having been removed, the will can then bring into operation its native powers, that is, that the will of itself is able to will and to choose, or not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it.

Rejection

This is an innovation and an error, and trends to elevate the powers of the free will, contrary to the declaration of the prophet:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding corrupt. Jeremiah 17:9

and of the apostle:

Among whom [sons of disobedience] we also all once lived in the lusts of the flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. Ephesians 2:3

Error 4

Who teach that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God.

Rejection

For these are contrary to the express testimony of Scripture.

Ye were dead through trespasses and sins. Ephesians 2:1, 5

And:

Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Genesis 6:5, 8:21

Moreover, to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed.

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Psalm 51:10

Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thin alter. Psalm 51:19

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled. Matthew 5:6

Error 5

Who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving graces and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since he applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion.

Rejection

For the experience of all ages and the Scriptures do both testify that this is untrue.

He showeth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his ordinances, they have not known them. Psalm 147:19, 20

Who in the generations gone by suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways. Acts 14:16

And:

And they [Paul and his companions] having been forbidden of the holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia, and when they were come over against Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit suffered them not. Acts 16:6, 7

Error 6

Who teach that in the true conversion of man no new qualities, powers, or gifts can be infused by God into the will, and that therefore faith, through which we are first converted and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God, but only an act of man, and that it cannot be said to be a gift, except in respect of the power to attain to this faith.

Rejection

For thereby they contradict the Holy Scriptures, which declare that God infuses new qualities of faith, of obedience, and of the consciousness of His love into our hearts:

I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it. Jeremiah 31:33

And:

I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and streams upon the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed. Isaiah 44:3

And:

The love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which hath been given us. Romans 5:5

This is also repugnant to the continuous practice of the church, which prays by the mouth of the prophet thus:

Turn thou me, and I shall be turned. Jeremiah 31:18

Error 7

Who teach that the grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising, or (as others explain it) that this is the noblest manner of working in the conversion of man, and that his manner of working, which consists in advising, is most in harmony with man's nature; and that there is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual, indeed, that God does not produce the consent of the will except through this manner of advising; and that the power of the divine working, whereby it surpasses the working of Satan, consists in this, that God promises eternal, while Satan promises only temporal goods.

Rejection

But this is altogether Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture which, besides this, teaches yet another and far more powerful and divine manner of the Holy Spirit's working in the conversion of man, as in Ezekiel:

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26

Error 8

Who teach that God in the regeneration of man does not use such powers of His omnipotence as potently and infallibly bend man's will to faith and conversion; but that all the works of grace having been accomplished, which God employs to convert man, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit when God intends man's regeneration and wills to regenerate him, and indeed that man often does so resist, that he prevents entirely his regeneration, and that it therefore remains in man's power to be regenerated or not.

Rejection

For this is nothing less than the denial of all the efficiency of Go's grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man, which is contrary to the apostles, who teach:

That we believe according to the working of the strength of his power. Ephesians 1:19

And:

That God fulfills every desire of goodness and every work of faith with power. 2 Thessalonians 1:11

And:

That his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness. 2 Peter 1:3

Error 9

Who teach that grace and free will are partial causes, which together work the beginning of conversion, and that grace, in order of working, does not precede the working of the will; that is, that God does not efficiently help the will of man unto conversion until the will of man moves and determines to do this.

Rejection

For the ancient church has long ago condemned this doctrine of the Pelagians, according to the words of the apostle:

So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that hath mercy. Romans 9:19

Likewise:

For who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? 1 Corinthians 4:7

And:

For it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Philippians 2:13