

Reprobation in the Belgic Confession and Other Calvinistic Confessions A Comparative Study

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Abstrak

Dalam pernyataan tentang doktrin pemilihan, baik Pengakuan Iman Belgic (1561) maupun Pengakuan Iman Gallican (Perancis, 1559) meneguhkan predestinasi kaum terpilih untuk hidup abadi dan *preterisi* kaum non-terpilih. Kesamaan yang mencolok di dalam kedua karya ini membuat sejumlah cendekiawan menganggap Pengakuan Iman Belgic sebagai “adaptasi dari Pengakuan Iman Gallican (1559),” yang sebagian besar dipersiapkan oleh John Calvin. Namun, tampaknya pernyataan tentang *preterisi* tidak konsisten dengan pandangan Calvin tentang predestinasi dan *reprobasi* yang ia kembangkan dalam edisi terakhir *Institutes*, tahun 1559. Untuk menelusuri (sejumlah) alasan inkonsistensi tersebut, studi ini memeriksa pelbagai pengakuan iman Calvinistis, baik yang ditulis di antara tahun 1560 maupun yang ditulis pada paruh pertama abad ketujuhbelas, pascakebangkitan Arminianisme.

Kata-Kata Kunci: predestinasi, pemilihan, preterisi, reprobasi, Calvin, pengakuan iman

Abstract

In their statements on the doctrine of election, both the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Gallican (French) Confession (1559) affirm a predestination to life for the elect and a *preterition* of the non-elect. Striking similarities in this statement in both works have led some scholars to consider the Belgic Confession to be “an adaptation of the Gallican Confession (1559),” which was prepared mainly by John Calvin. However, the statement on *preterition* seems to be inconsistent with Calvin’s view of predestination and *reprobation* which he fully develops in the final, 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. This study examines various Calvinistic confessions written around 1560 as well as those written during the first half of the seventeenth century, after the rise of Arminianism, in an attempt to discover the reason(s) for this inconsistency.

Keywords: predestination, election, preterition, reprobation, Calvin, confession of faith

The doctrine of predestination, which the Reformation had inherited from Augustine,¹ is commonly understood as involving two aspects: predestination to eternal life and predestination to eternal damnation. The doctrine has been prominent in the writings

of the major Reformers such as Luther, Bucer, and Zwingli, as well as the second-generation “codifiers of Reformation theology” such as Calvin, Bullinger, and others. It was developed most fully, however, in the writings of

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 109-10.

Calvin, particularly in the final edition of the *Institutes* which was published in 1559.²

While the Reformers of the sixteenth century essentially advocate predestination to eternal life (*election*), they are not all agreed on the concept of predestination to eternal damnation (*reprobation*). Reprobation, in Calvin's view, consists of

two elements, namely, *preterition*, or the determination to pass by some persons in the bestowal of regenerating and saving graces; and *condemnation*, or the determination to punish those who are passed by for their sins, by assigning them to dishonor and to the wrath of God for their sins.³

Berkhof notes the distinction between preterition as a sovereign act of God, based on His mere good pleasure, with no consideration of the demerits of man, and condemnation (sometimes called *precondemnation*) as a judicial act, in which the non-elect are punished "for their sins." As Calvin emphasizes, "none undeservedly perished."⁴ Other theologians distinguish between *negative preterition*, defined as "either the negative passing-by, or the sovereign determination to pass by, those who refuse to receive the grace of election," and *positive reprobation*, which refers to

God's eternal decree and purpose to predestine or foreordain a certain portion of mankind to everlasting death, in illustration of the divine justice.⁵

Among the Reformers, Calvin was the most pronounced in maintaining an absolute double predestination. For Calvin, the function of God's will in bestowing his saving grace is not confined to his having "passed by"

the non-elect. The action of God's will is not preterition but reprobation. Thus Calvin is known for his laconic assertion: "Whom God passes by (*praeterit*), he condemns (*reprobat*)."⁶

The Reformed doctrine of predestination, however, represents a spectrum of opinion:

It moved between the concept of a single predestination to life and the concept of a full double predestination to salvation and damnation conceived in the mind of God prior to his permissive willing of the Fall.⁷

The Belgic Confession (1561), in Article 16 on "the doctrine of election," affirms a predestination to life for the elect and a *preterition* of the non-elect.⁸ In its theology, the Belgic Confession has much in common with the Gallican (French) Confession of 1559, which was prepared mainly by Calvin. In fact, the similarities between the two are so striking that some scholars consider the Belgic Confession to be "an adaptation of the Gallican Confession (1559),"⁹ and that it "has its roots ultimately in Calvin's Geneva."¹⁰ Between Article 16 of the Belgic Confession and Article 12 of the Gallican Confession there is almost a word-for-word correspondence, though not necessarily in the exact same sentence order. The fact that both confessions affirm only a preterition of the non-elect seems to betray an inconsistency with Calvin's assertion of reprobation in the 1559 *Institutes*.

Two questions arise with regard to this seemingly inconsistency. First, one wonders whether Calvin was being inconsistent in this matter or whether he intentionally allows the two different viewpoints on the fate of the non-elect to appear in his two works mentioned above. And if so, for what reason? The second question concerns why the Belgic

² Richard A. Muller, "Predestination," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 3:332-38. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.21.2, 4.

³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 116.

⁴ *Institutes*, III.24.12.

⁵ Edward D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols* (Columbus, Ohio: Champlin Press, 1900), 395; A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961), 75.

⁶ J. T. McNeill, "Introduction," in *Institutes*, lix. See also *Institutes*, III.23.1.

⁷ Muller, in *OER*, 3:333.

⁸ Cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 116.

⁹ Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, tr. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Baker/Apollos, 1993), 142-43.

¹⁰ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *A Place to Stand* (N.p.: Bible Way, n.d.), 36.

Confession agrees with the Gallican Confession on this subject and not with the *Institutes*.

This study attempts to find the possible answers to these questions by examining various Calvinistic confessions written around 1560 as well as those written during the first half of the seventeenth century. The study employs a comparative method and focuses on the view of reprobation in those confessions. As the results of the study unfold, no satisfactory answer could be found to the first question in Calvin's own writings or contemporary literature. However, with regard to the second question the study has found support for the fact that the Belgic Confession, in spite of its strong Calvinist influence, reflects instead a common view held by its contemporaries of a single predestination to life and a limited view of preterition. Calvin's insistence on positive reprobation in the *Institutes*, despite initial attacks to it, have providentially proven to be a stronghold against Arminianism that arises only a few decades later—a teaching that shakes the foundations of the Reformed belief in election and salvation.

The View of Reprobation in Calvinistic Confessions around 1560 A.D.

Between 1559 and 1562, the Reformed churches of France, the Lowlands (today's Netherlands and Belgium), Scotland, and England, each sanctions a confession that reflects a Calvinist background and teaching. While all of these confessions agree on their view of election, they show a variant of opinions with regard to reprobation.

The Gallican Confession of Faith (1559)

The draft of the Gallican Confession, consisting of thirty-four articles, was prepared by Calvin and his pupil, de Chandieu, for the first National Synod of the French Reformed churches that met in Paris in 1559. After making some modifications that involved

mere insignificant changes,¹¹ the Synod adopted the Confession that now contained forty articles. It was revised again and ratified at the seventh National Synod held at La Rochelle in 1571 (hence it is also called the Confession of Rochelle). Two editions of the Confession were published: first in 1559, consisting of thirty-five articles with a foreword addressed to "the poor believers" in France and all who wish to listen; the other in 1560, consisting of forty articles and preceded by a letter to the king.¹²

The Gallican Confession is a faithful summary of the doctrines of Calvin.¹³ As mentioned above, the topic of predestination occurs in Article 12, which reads:

We believe that from this corruption and general condemnation in which all men are plunged, God, according to his eternal and immutable counsel, calleth those whom he hath chosen by his goodness and mercy alone in our Lord Jesus Christ, without consideration of their works, to display in them the riches of his mercy; *leaving the rest in this same corruption and condemnation to show in them his justice.* For the ones are no better than the others, until God discerns them according to his immutable purpose which he has determined in Jesus Christ before the creation of the world. Neither can any man gain such a reward by his own virtue, as by nature we can not have a single good feeling, affection, or thought, except God has first put it into our hearts.¹⁴

The article clearly affirms a single predestination to life and a negative preterition without introducing positive reprobation. The Confession, however, uses the term "reprobate" in connection with the identity of the true Church. Article 27 defines the true Church, according to the Word of God, as

¹¹ The Synod expanded Calvin's treatment of the Word of God from one article to five. See De Greef, 143; Bernard Roussel, "Gallic Confession," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 1:156-58.

¹² De Greef, 143.

¹³ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1919), 1:495.

¹⁴ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:366-67. Italics added.

the company of the faithful who agree to follow his Word, and the pure religion which it teaches; who advance in it all their lives, growing and becoming more confirmed in the fear of God.

The article refers to the “reprobates” as a class that, along with the “hypocrites,” exists “among the faithful.”¹⁵ There is no clear indication that the use of the term “reprobates” here implies a view of reprobation in the Calvinist sense. Moreover, had the Confession intended to take up this view, it could have mentioned it in Article 12. It seems more likely that the term “reprobates” is used in this context as a synonym of “the non-elect.”

The Scots Confession (1560)

In 1560 the Scottish Parliament commissioned John Knox and five other ministers to produce a statement of the Protestant Christian faith, which was intended “to be a definitive declaration of faith of all within that realm who adhered to the cause of the Reformation.”¹⁶ In preparing the confession, Knox, who “had sat at the feet of Calvin,”¹⁷ drew largely upon Calvin’s theology. It came to expression in the twenty-five articles of the Scots Confession, which was accepted and adopted by the Parliament in August 1560 with almost no objections.¹⁸ The Confession became the standard and basis of the Church of Scotland and remained its official doctrinal statement until superseded (but not abrogated) by the adoption of the Westminster Confession of 1647. The Scots Confession had imparted to Scottish thought a marked Calvinistic cast.¹⁹

¹⁵ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:375.

¹⁶ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 38-39; cf. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2003), II:387.

¹⁷ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 38.

¹⁸ G. D. Henderson, ed. *The Scots Confession 1560*. Modern English rendering by James Bulloch (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), 9-11. See also Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions* II:387.

¹⁹ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 39.

The doctrine of election is treated in Chapter VIII as part of the section on the doctrine of Christ (Chs. VI-XI). The chapter begins with the statement:

That same eternal God and Father, who by grace alone chose us in His Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid, appointed Him to be our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls.²⁰

It continues with an exposition and affirmation of Christ’s true humanity and true divinity, in order that He may carry out the realization of God’s election: Christ has to be true God and true man in order to become the Mediator between God and man, and the Messiah and Redeemer who bears the punishment of our transgressions and restores whatever we have lost in Adam.

The Confession, however, is completely silent about the lot of those who are not chosen unto salvation. The only mention of “the reprobate” in this chapter is made with reference to what they have in common with the elect:

Therefore we are not afraid to call God our Father, not so much because He has created us, which we have in common with the *reprobate*, as because He has given unto us His only Son to be our brother, and given us grace to acknowledge and embrace Him as our only Mediator.²¹

Thus we cannot deduce with certainty what the term “reprobate” here implies, except to refer to the reprobate as a class of people rather than individual persons. What the Scots Confession positively affirms, instead, is a single predestination to life. Henderson is correct in observing that “the Calvinism of the Scots Confession is undoubted, but is mild and indeterminate as compared with later expressions.”²²

²⁰ The texts quoted in this section are taken from Henderson, *Scots Confession 1560*, 64.

²¹ Italics added.

²² Henderson, *Scots Confession 1560*, 18.

The Belgic Confession (1561)

The primary author of the Belgic Confession was Guy de Bres (d. 1567), a Calvinist minister from Mons in the southern Low Countries. The structure and organization of the Belgic Confession clearly parallel the Gallican Confession of 1559, following closely its order and topics. However, certain topics of the Belgic Confession are expounded in much greater detail than its French counterpart, so that the Belgic Confession can be regarded as an independent composition. According to Hakkenberg, the confession may have been drafted as early as 1559.²³ It was first published in French at Rouen in 1561. Nearly every copy of the original edition was destroyed by official order, only two copies still exist.²⁴ It was translated into Dutch in 1562 and first adopted by the Synod of Antwerp in 1566. At the Synod of Emden in 1571, the Belgic Confession was approved as a confessional standard, which signaled, as Hakkenberg notes, “the acceptance of a Calvinist theology in the Reformed churches of the Low Countries.”²⁵

The text of the Belgic Confession had gone through a number of minor revisions and alterations, first made as early as 1566 and subsequently throughout the later sixteenth century. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) authorized a careful revision of the text, bringing into harmony the existing French, Dutch, and Latin versions. Hakkenberg observes that this revised version differs from the original French text; it gave the Confession more precise language, particularly on the denunciation of the Anabaptists. Schaff, however, emphasizes that the modifications of the text of the Belgic Confession involved the

wording and length, but *not the doctrine*.²⁶ The English translation of the Belgic Confession is based on the French text of a manuscript copy made in 1580 and considered by the Belgic churches as an authentic document. This manuscript copy was the basis for the revisions being made by the Synod of Dort.²⁷

Article 16, which is one among the texts revised,²⁸ reads:

We believe that all the posterity of Adam, being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest himself such as he is; that is to say, merciful and just;

Merciful, since he delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable council, of mere goodness hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works;

Just, in *leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves*.²⁹

In spite of the revisions that had been made to this article, it still shows a very close resemblance to Article 12 of the Gallican Confession. It certainly affirms a single predestination to life for the elect and a negative preterition of the non-elect.

The Thirty-Nine Articles (1562/1563)

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England has its roots in the Forty-Two Articles composed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1553 in the name of King Edward VI.³⁰ The latter was revised in 1562 by Archbishop Matthew Parker, who reduced its content to thirty-nine articles. The text, in Latin, was passed, recorded, and ratified in 1563. After several revisions, the Articles were eventually sanctioned by Queen Elizabeth I in 1571, and published in Latin and English. While Cranmer himself leaned more toward Lutheran thought, subsequent revisions to the

²³ Michael A. Hakkenberg, “Belgic Confession,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, I:137-39. Cf. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 78ff; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:502ff.

²⁴ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 405;

²⁵ Hakkenberg, “Belgic Confession,” 138.

²⁶ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I:506. Italics added.

²⁷ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I:506-07.

²⁸ Hakkenberg, “Belgic Confession,” 138.

²⁹ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:389. Italics added.

³⁰ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, II:526-27.

Articles had incorporated a number of influence from Calvinist and Zwinglian views.³¹

Morris maintains that the Thirty-Nine Articles are essentially, though less positively, Calvinistic in type.³² Framed to be a national confession, and designed to accommodate opinions and tendencies of diverse persons and parties, it is of no surprise that the Articles “should content themselves with generic rather than specific statements, and with affirmations of plain scriptural facts more than with recondite reasoning and deductions respecting such mysteries as the divine decrees and the election of grace.” Yet its Calvinistic essence, says Morris, “has led the English mind to accept, at least in outline, the general system of belief bearing that significant name.”³³

The doctrine of predestination and election appears in Article XVII, as part of the section on salvation in Christ (Articles XI-XVIII). It begins with the statement:

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor.³⁴

The elect who receive this excellent benefit of God are also “called according to God’s purpose by his Spirit working in due season; justified freely; made sons of God by adoption; and made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ.” Thus “they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God’s mercy, attain to everlasting felicity.” By contrast, the “*curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ,*” will continually “have before their eyes *the sentence of God’s*

Predestination.”³⁵ This, the Article warns, is “a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.”

The Thirty-Nine Articles thus affirm a single predestination to life, and only by implication mention predestination to damnation. It does not state definitively its stance regarding the lot of the non-elect in relation to God’s decrees.

Conclusion

The four confessions above invariably affirm a single predestination to life. As regards the non-elect, only the Gallican and Belgic Confessions affirm a negative preterition. The Scots Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles, on the other hand, do not provide a clear statement on the subject. As scholars are generally agreed that the revisions on the original texts of the Gallican and Belgic Confessions concern minor changes in wording and length, and not in content or doctrine, it could be concluded that the negative preterition in both confessions was most likely original from the authors.

The View of Reprobation in Calvinistic Confessions from 1595-1647 A.D.

Around the turn of the century and during the first half of the seventeenth century, other Calvinistic confessions had occurred in England, Ireland, and the Netherlands, mainly in defense of Calvinist teaching. But unlike the former Calvinistic confessions, which affirm a single predestination to life, the new ones affirm a double predestination of election and reprobation, though not all of them follow precisely Calvin’s concept of reprobation.

³¹ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions*, II:526; cf. Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1895), 66ff.

³² Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 39-40.

³³ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 40.

³⁴ Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, III:497-99.

³⁵ Italics added.

The Lambeth Articles (1595)

The Lambeth Articles³⁶ contain nine statements about predestination that were intended to be a Calvinistic Appendix to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The articles were composed by William Whitaker, the regius professor of divinity at Cambridge, in response to the disputes started by Peter Baro, a professor of theology at Cambridge, who argued in favor of a conditional decree of election. The dispute was heightened by the preaching of William Barrett of Caius College, Cambridge, in April 1595, in which he publicly denied the indefectibility of grace and questioned the concept of double predestination. Seeking to suppress such ideas, which later found expression in Arminianism, Whitaker wrote the nine articles that maintained a strict predestinarian view. Whitaker was supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, who was theologically a Calvinist. He called a conference of theologians and churchmen at Lambeth Palace, London, in November 1595. After some modifications, the articles were approved by the conference. They were later accepted by the Convocation of the Church of Ireland in 1615, where they provided the basis for the Irish Articles. Although the Lambeth Articles never gained the same authority as the Thirty-Nine Articles, its function as precursor to the Irish Articles, the Canons of Dort (1619), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) proves its significance.

The Lambeth Articles openly declares a predestination and reprobation from eternity (Article 1). It does not mention preterition, but states a judicial condemnation of the reprobate (Article 4), echoing Calvin's view that stresses sin and guilt as the basis for the

judicial sentence of condemnation.³⁷ The Lambeth Articles read:

1. God from eternity hath predestinated certain men unto life; certain men he hath reprobated.
2. The moving or efficient cause of predestination unto life is not the foresight of faith, or of perseverance, or of good works, or of anything that is in the person predestinated, but only the good will and pleasure of God.
3. There is predetermined a certain number of the predestinate, which can neither be augmented nor diminished.
4. Those who are not predestinated to salvation shall be necessarily damned *for their sins*.
5. A true, living, and justifying faith, and the Spirit of God justifying [sanctifying], is not extinguished, falleth not away; it vanisheth not away in the elect, either finally or totally.
6. A man truly faithful, that is, such a one who is endued with a justifying faith, is certain, with the full assurance of faith, of the remission of his sins and of his everlasting salvation in Christ.
7. Saving grace is not given, is not granted, is not communicated to all men, by which they may be saved of they will.
8. No man can come to Christ unless it shall be given unto him, and unless the Father shall draw him; and all men are not drawn by the Father, that they may come to the Son.
9. It is not in the will or power of every one to be saved.³⁸

The Irish Articles of Religion (1615)

Reformation in Ireland had come by way of intensified immigration from England and Scotland in the late sixteenth century.³⁹ In the early 1590s, Trinity College in Dublin became the center for Reformed theology and a stronghold of Protestantism. The Irish Articles may have been written by the head of

³⁷ *Institutes*, III.24.12. See Fred H. Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 76.

³⁸ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:523-24. Italics added.

³⁹ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, II:551; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I:662-65.

³⁶ Muller, in OER 3:336; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:523; Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, II:545; Hardwick, *History of the Articles of Religion*, 165ff.

the theological faculty at Trinity, James Ussher (1581-1656), who later became the Archbishop of Armagh (1625). The author drew upon the Lambeth Articles and the Thirty-Nine Articles in an expansive doctrinal statement of 104 articles. They were adopted as the confessional standard by the Convocation of Irish Reformed clergy at Dublin in 1615. Although the Irish Articles was soon replaced by the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1635, its lasting significance is preserved by its incorporation, sometimes verbatim, into the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). As the chief source of the latter, the agreement between the two confessions in the order of subjects, the headings of chapters, and in many single phrases, as well as in spirit and sentiment, is very striking.

The doctrine of “Predestination and God’s Eternal Decree” is stated in Chapter III, Articles 11-17. It is placed after the doctrine of the Trinity and before the doctrine of creation. Calvinist in its theology, the Irish Articles maintain a belief in double predestination (Articles 11-12), limited atonement (Article 13-15), and the perseverance of the elect (Article 16). Preterition is not mentioned, but Article 12 refers to reprobation unto death as linked to God’s eternal counsel and to a certain number of people:

12. By the same *eternal counsel* God hath predestinated some unto life, and *reprobated some unto death*: of both which there is a certain number, known only to God, which can neither be increased nor diminished.⁴⁰

Echoing the Lambeth Articles, Article 15 mentions the judicial condemnation of the reprobate:

15. Such as are predestinated unto life be called according unto God’s purpose (his Spirit working in due season), and through grace they obey the calling, they be justified freely; they be made sons of God by adoption; they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ; they walk religiously in good works; and at length, by

God’s mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity. But such as are not predestinated to salvation shall finally be condemned *for their sins*.

In Article 16, the effect of predestination on the reprobate echoes the same statement found in the Thirty-Nine Articles:

16. . . . and on the contrary side, for *curious and carnal persons lacking in the spirit of Christ to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God’s predestination is very dangerous*.

The Canons of Dort (1619)

The rise of Arminianism in the Netherlands and the presentation of its main points of teaching in the Remonstrance of 1610 had initiated the convening of a national church conference in the city of Dort from November 1618 to May 1619.⁴¹ A body of approximately eighty Dutch ministers and theologians and twenty-six representatives from Reformed Churches in England, Scotland, France, Switzerland, and Germany met with thirteen Remonstrants at the synod. The Remonstrance advocated a doctrine of predestination against Calvin’s, which they summarized under five points, namely, unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. After five weeks the Remonstrants were dismissed and their beliefs condemned in The Canons of Dort.

The organization of the Canons follows the framework set forth in the Remonstrance, refuting each of its five points in positive terms to define the chief articles of Dutch Calvinist doctrine on: (1) double predestination; (2) limited atonement; (3) the nature of sin; (4) the dispensation of grace; (5) the perseverance of the saints.

The statements on reprobation are presented in The First Main Point of Doctrine on Divine Election and Reprobation, Articles 6 and 15. Article 6 affirms that the

⁴⁰ The texts quoted in this section are taken from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:528-29. Italics added.

⁴¹ *Ecumenical Creeds*, 122ff.; Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, II:569; Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1994), 10-13.

election of “his chosen ones” and the passing by of “those who have not been chosen” are rooted in God’s eternal decision. Article 15, on reprobation, affirms the fact of preterition and extends it by the inclusion of the final condemnation of the reprobate as part of God’s eternal decision:

Moreover, Holy Scripture most especially highlights this eternal and undeserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us, in that it further bears witness that not all people have been chosen but that *some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God’s eternal election*—those, that is, concerning whom God, on the basis of his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure, made the following decision: *to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves*; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but *finally to condemn and eternally punish them* (having been left in their own ways and under his just judgment), *not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins*, in order to display his justice.

And this is the decision of reprobation, which does not at all make God the author of sin (a blasphemous thought!) but rather its fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger.⁴²

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Westminster Confession of Faith is the last major confessional statement of the Reformation.⁴³ Like many other doctrinal documents of the age, it is the product of political as well as theological circumstances. Religious and civil wars between England and Scotland that broke in the early 1640s had urged Parliament to call an assembly of bishops, clergymen, and university theologians in July 1643. Their task would be to prepare a confessional statement for use in the Churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Assembly of 121 members, including Scottish and Irish delegates, met for the most part in the Jerusalem Chamber of the Westminster Abbey. The Westminster

Confession and the Catechisms were the major works that the assembly produced over the course of five years of their meeting.

The theology of the Westminster Confession reflects Calvinist thought as it evolved among Puritans in the seventeenth century. The members of the Assembly were generally committed to the theology that had developed in the classical Reformed traditions.⁴⁴ They intended to give expression to a generic Reformed faith that could be agreed upon by the Reformed everywhere. They drew upon various Reformed theological traditions, British as well as those from the continent, that were melded in their Puritan theological consensus.

As British theologians had participated at the Synod of Dort, members of the Assembly were not hospitable to Arminianism. But their view of the doctrine of the divine decrees had been somewhat modified from that of Calvin, and attention was shifted to the concrete facts of experience.⁴⁵ As Pelikan and Hotchkiss note, a significant development of Calvinism is expressed here in that members of the Assembly “uphold the doctrine of divine providence while avoiding what were taken to be the fatalistic consequences of double predestination.”⁴⁶

The document of the Westminster Confession was presented to Parliament for approval in late 1646, and its first public printing appeared on 29 April 1647. In this form it served as the confession of the Churches of Ireland, England, and Scotland until 1660. In 1690 it was again adopted as a doctrinal standard by the Church of Scotland, and in 1729 it was adopted by the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church in colonial America. It remains the official confession of the Church of Scotland and a number of Presbyterian churches in North America.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster – Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973), 38ff.

⁴⁵ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 41.

⁴⁶ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions*, II:602.

⁴⁷ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions*, II:602.

⁴² *Ecumenical Creeds*, 123-26. Italics added.

⁴³ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions*, II:601-03; Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, I:727-82.

Similar to the Irish Articles, the doctrine of predestination and God's eternal decrees (Chapter 3) is placed after the doctrine of God and the Trinity and before the doctrine of creation. In Article 3 of Chapter 3, the Westminster Confession affirms a double predestination:

3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and *angels* are *predestinated* unto everlasting life, and others *fore-ordained* to everlasting death.⁴⁸

The lot of the non-elect is further described in Article 7:

7. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, *to pass by*, and *to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin*, to the praise of his glorious justice.

Chapter 5, on Providence, describes the reason for the hardening of heart of the non-elect as a result of former sins:

6. As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God, as a righteous judge, *for former sins*, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

As regards the effectual calling to faith (Chapter 12), the Confession maintains that God effectually calls, by His word and Spirit, to grace and salvation in Christ, *only* those whom He has predestinated unto life (Article

1). Article 4 states that the same call does not elicit the same response in those not elected:

4. Others, *not elected*, although they may be called by the ministry of the word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess; and to assert and maintain that they may be without warrant of the word of God.

Expositors of the Westminster Confession demonstrate differing interpretations with regard to the Confession's statement on the sovereign will of God in reprobation. Some, like Murray,⁴⁹ advocates God's sovereign will in *both* the preterition *and* the ordination of the non-elect to dishonor and wrath. He observes that an important distinction is implied in Article 7: the phrase "to pass by" is not modified in any way, whereas the statement "to ordain them to dishonor and wrath" is modified by the words "for their sin." This distinction indicates that it is not because men are sinners that they are passed by; otherwise, all men would be passed by. While sin is not the ground on which some are passed by and are therefore non-elect, it is the ground for dishonor and wrath to which they are ordained. Dishonor and wrath presuppose ill-desert; they always have their judicial ground in sin and condemnation. Murray emphasizes:

The ground of dishonor and wrath is truly sin and sin alone, but the reason why they, the non-elect, are ordained to such dishonor and wrath, when others equally sinful and hell-deserving are not, is the sovereign will of God—He may extend or withhold mercy as He pleases.⁵⁰

Murray connects God's good pleasure with the passing by *and* the ordination to dishonor

⁴⁸ The texts quoted in this section are taken from *The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, Virginia: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1965). Italics added.

⁴⁹ John Murray, "Theology of the Westminster Standards," *The Calvin Forum* 9 (1944): 111-15.

⁵⁰ Murray, "Theology of the Westminster Standards," 114.

and wrath, as the sentence structure suggests. Hence his conclusion:

In preterition only the sovereign good pleasure of God operates, but in the ordination to dishonor and wrath *both* the sovereign good pleasure *and* the judicial condemnation of God are operative.⁵¹

Other expositors, like Morris and Hodge, affirm that the “passing by” is grounded solely in the sovereignty of God. But the ordination to dishonor and wrath is in their view—as Hodge puts it—“not in the least sovereign, but purely judicial, because God has determined to treat the reprobate precisely according to their deserts in the view of absolute justice.”⁵² According to Morris, the judicial reprobation as stated in Article 7 is “not viewed merely as a purpose formed in eternity, but also an event in time, following chronologically as the sequel of a career of sin.”⁵³ The statements of Article 7, and also of Chapter 5 Article 6 (on Providence), “never affirm that the final condemnation of the wicked is based on any other ground or has any other cause than *their own willful sin against him*; they nowhere teach, as has sometimes been alleged, that God created any portion of mankind in order to exhibit his justice in their final condemnation.”⁵⁴ He stresses that “the Symbols nowhere follow Calvin in affirming that the portion of mankind who are not elect unto salvation were created to be damned, but invariably affirm that they are in fact condemned to punishment *for their sins*, and for their sins only.”⁵⁵ And Hodge emphasizes, “Our standards are very careful to guard this point explicitly.”⁵⁶

In his conclusion Morris stresses that although the Confession and Catechisms of Westminster “assert and define not only

preterition but judicial reprobation—thus giving to the doctrine of Calvin its completest confessional expression—they do not assert, as Calvin did, a positive foreordination unto damnation, even from eternity.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

The Calvinist Confessions from the late sixteenth century until mid-seventeenth century all advocate a double predestination of election and reprobation. During this time attacks against Calvin’s doctrine of predestination had culminated in the Remonstrance of 1610, and confessions such as the Lambeth Articles and the Canons of Dort responded to such attacks by affirming a double predestination. The Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession, while not necessarily composed with polemical intentions, were clearly aware of the issues and had also adopted Calvin’s view of double predestination against the Arminian heresy. Cottret has aptly noted:

Fifty years later (after the publication of the Institutes in 1559), adherence to predestination became an absolute criterion of orthodoxy when a more liberal form of Protestantism, nourished on the teachings of Arminius, arose in Holland.⁵⁸

While all of the four Confessions discussed above affirm a judicial reprobation, they differ in emphasis of how judicial reprobation relates to God’s sovereign will and his eternal decree. The Canons of Dort affirms judicial reprobation as part of God’s sovereign determination from eternity, whereas the Westminster Confession’s statement on the subject has been interpreted in different ways.

The Fate of the Non-Elect in the Belgic Confession

One of the main issues of this paper, as stated at the beginning, is to find the answer

⁵¹ Murray, “Theology of the Westminster Standards,” 114.

⁵² Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 75.

⁵³ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 395ff.

⁵⁴ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 398.

⁵⁵ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 397. Italics original.

⁵⁶ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 75.

⁵⁷ Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 400.

⁵⁸ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin – A Biography*, tr. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/T&T Clark, 2000), 323.

to the question of why the Belgic Confession agrees with the Gallican Confession regarding the fate of the non-elect and not with the final edition of the *Institutes*. The above discussion shows that while Calvin emphasizes predestination to life or to death,⁵⁹ the Belgic Confession affirms predestination or election to life and preterition of the non-elect, showing in this case a close parallel to the Gallican Confession. Since the latter was directly shaped by Calvin himself, it begs the question why Calvin did not elucidate on election and reprobation in it to reflect his thoughts on the subject. Moreover, since the Gallican Confession of 1559 was published in the same year as the final edition of the *Institutes*, at a time when the subject of predestination in all its aspects had been crystallized in Calvin's mature thought, it is difficult to understand why traces of this thought is barely found in the Gallican Confession, provided the editorial work on it did not include changes of content or doctrine.

When composing the Belgic Confession, Guy de Bres must have known of Calvin's works and views on the subject. The *Institutes* had been circulating widely in two languages, Latin and French, since its first edition of 1536. It had been revised in 1539, 1541, 1543, 1550, 1554, before the final edition appeared in 1559.⁶⁰ In the 1536 edition, the subject of predestination had not yet appeared as an independent doctrine. Calvin dealt with it in two places—in the explanation of the second article of the Apostles Creed and in the definition of the Church. Calvin identified the true members of the church with the elect alone, whose salvation is definitive and cannot be cancelled. He also observed that the separation of the elect from the reprobate is effected by God.⁶¹

Calvin's first clear statement on election and reprobation was found in the French catechism, *Instruction in Faith*, which he wrote in Geneva in 1537. Here he treated the doctrine of predestination in a separate chapter titled "Election and Predestination." The chapter was placed not in the section about God or the Church, but in the section on Christian experience.⁶² This fact, according to Wendel, marks an important and decisive stage.⁶³ In this chapter we find that reprobation is affirmed by the same warrant as election:

The seed of the word of God takes root and brings forth fruit only in those whom the Lord, by his eternal election, has predestined to be children and heirs of the heavenly kingdom. To all the others (who *by the same counsel of God are rejected before the foundation of the world*) the clear and evident preaching of truth can be nothing but an odor to death.⁶⁴

In the second edition of the *Institutes*, published in 1539, Calvin added a new chapter in which he expounded a complete system of predestination. Wendel notes that here Calvin:

Made the election and reprobation of each individual dependent upon the Divine predetermination, and the reason he gave for both is the manifestation of the glory of God.⁶⁵

The chapter was placed after the section on the work of salvation and linked with the doctrine of providence; and so it remained in the following editions up to and in the edition of 1554.⁶⁶

In the 1559 edition Calvin devoted a substantial amount of space to explain this doctrine because of the various misunderstandings it had generated. Unlike the previous editions, which appeared between

⁵⁹ *Institutes*, III.xxi.5.

⁶⁰ Francois Wendel, *Calvin – Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, tr. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 112ff.

⁶¹ Wendel, *Calvin*, 265.

⁶² John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, tr. Paul T. Fuehrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 36-37, 84.

⁶³ Wendel, *Calvin*, 265.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, 36. Italics added.

⁶⁵ Wendel, *Calvin*, 141.

⁶⁶ Wendel, *Calvin*, 267.

1539 and 1554, Calvin now separated the discussion of predestination from that of providence. He treated providence at the end of the section on the doctrine of God, and predestination after the doctrine of Christ and his work of redemption, with the purpose to “show more clearly that it is *in Christ* that election takes place.”⁶⁷ This placement is reflected in the Gallican and Belgic Confessions.

The fact that numerous editions of the *Institutes* had circulated and that Calvin’s thought on reprobation had been pronounced as early as 1537 and 1539, could suggest the possibility⁶⁸ that de Bres’ choice of not following Calvin’s view on reprobation is intentional on his part, perhaps due to the difficulty in understanding this doctrine as Calvin himself admits.⁶⁹ Moreover, during de Bres’ time the tremendous challenge to the Reformed belief in election and salvation had not yet appeared.

Even though the real reasons for de Bres’ choice may never be known, yet the comparison of Calvinistic Confessions discussed above demonstrates that his conscious choice for affirming a preterition of the non-elect rather than reprobation seems to reflect his adherence to preterition as a common perception held also by the other confessions.

⁶⁷ Wendel, *Calvin*, 268. Italics added.

⁶⁸ Although no proof has yet been found to corroborate this opinion.

⁶⁹ In his “Introduction” in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, lix, McNeill notes how the result of Calvin’s thoughts on the doctrine of reprobation was “shocking even to his [Calvin’s] own mind and has proved unacceptable or distressing to many of his readers.” He also notes that Calvin “shudders at this conclusion even while expounding and defending it, and he [Calvin] knows well the moral difficulty it involves.” McNeill concludes that Calvin’s prolonged attention to predestination is “partly explicable by the fact that he is appalled before the mystery of it.” Nevertheless, no matter how dreadful it is to contemplate God’s eternal decree regarding the damned, Calvin insists that the doctrine “is not to be denied or evaded” (*Institutes*, III.xxiii.7). As McNeill observes, Calvin “states and reiterates this doctrine of reprobation with the greatest precision,” but at the same time “asks for great caution in the mention of the topic” (*Institutes*, III.xxiii.14). Calvin suggests that “mature minds [should] reflect upon ‘this high and incomprehensible mystery,’ in thinking of which ‘we should be sober and humble.’”

Conclusion

It is a striking fact that only after the challenge from Arminianistic teaching, as is the case of the Lambeth Articles, that all of the Calvinistic Confessions adopted the doctrine of double predestination. Although their exposition of the doctrine may not fully agree with Calvin in all its aspects, evidently the doctrine of double predestination provides a stronghold to guard against the dangers of conditional election as the Arminian heresy espouses. This danger had not been in view during the early 1560s. The Belgic Confession, like its contemporaries, reflects the common perception of affirming a single predestination to life and a preterition of the non-elect.

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