

# “Merciful and Just ”

## An Exposition of Article Sixteen of the Belgic Confession.

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### Article 16: The Doctrine of Election

We believe that—all Adam’s descendants having thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of the first man<sup>1</sup>—God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just. He is merciful in withdrawing and saving from this perdition those whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable counsel,<sup>2</sup> has elected<sup>3</sup> and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord<sup>4</sup> by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works.<sup>5</sup> He is just in leaving the others in their ruin and fall into which they plunged themselves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom 3:12 <sup>2</sup> Jn 6:37, 44, 10:29, 17:2, 9, 12, 18:9 <sup>3</sup> 1 Sam 12:22; Ps 65:4; Acts 13:48; Rom 9:16, 11:5; Tit 1:1 <sup>4</sup> Jn 15:16, 19; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4-5 <sup>5</sup> Mal 1:2-3; Rom 9:11-13; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:4-5 <sup>6</sup> Rom 9:19-22; 1 Pt 2:8

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Adam’s fall into sin had disastrous consequences for the entire human race—sin and death, natural disasters, wars and rumors of war. As the biological head of the human race, when Adam sinned against God, he brought about the corruption of human nature and the sting of death not only for himself, but for all of his biological ancestors. But Adam was also the federal head of the human race, acting upon our behalf, so that the guilt of his sin is imputed (or credited) to all of us. Since we are born with Adam’s corrupt nature (what the New Testament describes as “the flesh”) and since we are guilty for Adam’s sin, our confession simply states: Adam’s sin was “enough to condemn the human race.” But Adam’s sin and its consequences for the human race is not the end of the story. In fact, Adam’s sin is only the beginning of the drama of redemption, setting the stage for the glories of the gospel which follow.

Keeping the big picture in mind (i.e., the box top to the puzzle), the biblical record indicates that as soon as Adam rebelled against God in Eden and brought down the covenant curse upon us all (death), God was immediately present in the garden promising to redeem Adam and Eve and their descendants through the seed of the woman (Eve). While Adam’s act of apostasy has grave consequences for us all, this rebellion did not catch God by surprise, nor did it ruin God’s plan for human history. Even as Adam’s fall into sin was decreed by God—yet in such a way that God is not responsible for Adam’s sin (cf. Article Thirteen of our confession)—so too, God also decreed to save a vast multitude of Adam’s fallen race. This brings us to Article Sixteen of our confession and the article on the doctrine of divine election. As our confession previously pointed out, God decrees whatsoever comes to pass, including the entrance of sin into the human race. But God has also decreed to save such a large number of guilty sinners that they cannot be counted. This is the supreme manifestation of God’s wonderful mercy. God will save countless people who do not deserve to be saved.

With the introduction of this topic, we move into a new section of our confession in which the focus shifts from creation, providence, and the fall of the human race into sin (articles Twelve through Fifteen), to a discussion of those things God does in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins (articles Sixteen-

Twenty-Six). Recall that God created all things out of nothing and then providentially upholds and sustains all those things he has made. The high point of the creation account comes on day six, when God creates Adam as the biological and federal head of the human race. Adam is created in God's image and is to rule over all the earth in God's name, serving as God's vice regent, exercising his dominion over the creatures as well as establishing godly culture.

According to the Genesis account, Adam was placed under a covenant of works in Eden, which establishes a time of probation during which Adam was to obey the commandment of life and not eat from the forbidden tree. If he did so, Adam would plunge himself and all those whom he represents into sin and death. Created in God's image, Adam was perfectly capable of obeying God's command in his own strength. As the divine image bearer, Adam was required to obey his creator simply as a matter of justice—creatures must obey their creator. He possessed the natural ability to do so.

When Adam sinned, he unleashed a series of horrible consequences upon himself and his descendants. When Adam broke the commandment of life, he brought death upon the human race and subjected all of us to that corruption we inherit from our first father. The divine image is deformed and defaced to the point of being beyond recognition. Because of Adam's sin, we are born with a sinful nature, which produces in us every manner of sinful desire from our earliest youth. Because of this inherited corruption, our wills are enslaved to our sinful desires, our minds are darkened to the things of God, we hate God's commandments, and we are subject to all manner of sickness and death. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. The reality of the human condition only serves to remind us that the doctrine of original sin is no mere medieval speculation, but a grim and abiding reality. The reality of human sin—and not human goodness or ability—is the biblical context through which we must discuss the doctrine of election.

The bad news of the fall of the human race into sin is very bad news indeed. As Reformed Christians, we make no bones about human sin and the consequences of Adam's rebellion in Eden. But as Reformed Christians we are not in any sense pessimistic about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In fact, the account of Adam's fall into sin is but the beginning of the story of our redemption. The fall of our race into sin is one theme in the opening chapter in the drama of our redemption from sin (creation and the establishment of a covenant of works are also part of this opening chapter). In the first two chapters of Genesis we find the account of the creation of all things, and we read of God's placing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam was forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But even as we read of Adam's rebellion against God in Genesis 3:1-14, from the moment that Adam sins, God is right there to pronounce the divine curse on the serpent as well as promise the redemption of sinners through the seed of the woman, who will himself be wounded when he crushes the head of serpent (v. 15). This is the first word of gospel, and the first prophecy of a coming redeemer, Jesus Christ, who is the seed of the woman. From the moment human sin enters the world, God promises to redeem all of his people. As soon as Adam breaks God's law—God comes to these sinners with the word of the gospel.

Who are these people whom God promises to redeem through the word of the gospel? These are the people whom God has chosen to save from before the foundation of the world. God's decision to save some (not all) of Adam's fallen race brings us to the doctrine of divine election addressed in Article Sixteen of our confession. While this subject is always controversial and, at times, far more speculative than biblical, the topic of election is only controversial because sinners don't want to be told that the only reason that any of us are saved from our sins is because there is something good in God which leads him

to save us. Not one of us deserve to be saved from our sin. If the doctrine of original sin leads to consequences as bad as those we have already seen in the previous articles—i.e. that we are born guilty in Adam with a corrupt and sinful nature—then what good thing remains in us which could possibly motivate God to take pity upon us?

The apostle Paul is perfectly clear about the human condition. In Romans 7:18, Paul writes: *“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”* If there is nothing good within us, then why does God save anyone? The answer to this question is to be found in God’s mercy and not in human goodness. Our salvation from the guilt and power of sin does not in any sense depend upon God finding or rewarding that one good thing which supposedly remains in us after our fall in Adam. Our deliverance from sin lies solely in the fact that God is merciful and good, because we are not. We are rescued from sin. We do not find our own way out.

While it is commonplace to hear the doctrine of election discussed along the lines of foreknowledge—God sees what we will do when the gospel is preached to us, and then responds to our decision, the exact opposite is the case. The biblical account of redemption repeatedly bears this out. In Deuteronomy 7:1-11 we read of the basis of God’s choice of Israel—and it is not his foreknowledge! Notice verses 6-9:

*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.*

God chose Israel because he loved Israel. What was there in Israel to foresee, which would cause God to choose this nation? The answer is found in I Samuel 12:22: *“For the LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself.”* God’s choice of Israel was based upon God’s sovereign purpose, to honor his name as the sovereign Lord. It was something he was pleased to do. The same thing holds true in the New Testament. As Jesus says in John 15:16, we choose God only because Jesus has first chosen us. The force of these words is hard to escape.

As to the basis for our Lord’s choice of particular sinners to be saved, in Ephesians 1:11, Paul declares that *“in [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”* In Romans 8:28, Paul tells us that *“we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* God foreknows who will believe because he has already chosen those who will believe! God’s choice of those whom he will save is based solely upon his purpose, not something good in the creature. Furthermore, God’s saving operations are never directed to the world in general, but always to those specific sinners he intends to save.<sup>1</sup> God chooses those whom he will save according to his purpose. He doesn’t provide for the salvation of the world, and then wait for sinners to meet certain conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> B. B. Warfield, The Plan of Salvation (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 87.

Many of us have heard election described as follows. The story of salvation is like a movie which God has already seen. He knows what the characters will do, so he chooses whom he will save based upon his knowledge of what the creature will do. But if we are to make the movie example fit the biblical data, we need to see God as the screenwriter, producer, and director. The characters do x, y, and z in the movie, because God determines what they will do when he wrote the script and detailed what their actions would be. God doesn't merely watch the movie and react to what the characters do. To make this analogy work, we must see that God wrote the movie and directs the main characters. In fact, we must understand that God built the stage, he invented the lights and the camera, and he did so by speaking them into being, as he does all of the characters. To argue that God merely knows what we will do and then reacts to us, trivializes the biblical teaching of creation, providence, and election beyond any biblical measure.

In Article Sixteen of our confession, the author divides the subject of election into two main parts, election and reprobation. Election refers to God's choice of some to be saved as a demonstration of his mercy and reprobation, which is God's passing over the others, leaving them to suffer the consequences of their sin and Adam's, as the manifestation of his justice. But Article Sixteen of our confession cannot be properly understood apart from articles Seventeen and Eighteen, which briefly summarize how God brings his decree to pass in human history through his mighty acts in redemptive history, especially the incarnation of his son, Jesus Christ, who will deliver his people from their sins. This is the historical record found in the Bible, which we often speak of as redemptive history, in which the central character, even in the Old Testament, is Jesus Christ. The main plot line throughout the redemptive drama is the on-going war between the seed of the woman and the serpent, which culminates with the serpent's defeat at the cross, just as God promised in the opening chapters of the biblical story.<sup>2</sup>

To put it more specifically, Article Seventeen deals with the execution (the outworking) of God's plan of redemption centering in the covenant of grace, while Article Eighteen speaks of Jesus taking to himself a true human nature to redeem Adam's fallen race. It is an incarnate Savior who serves as the mediator of this gracious covenant, while at the same time fulfilling the demands of the covenant of works. It is Jesus who dies for our sins, thereby removing the curse from his people. Furthermore, when we consider the biblical evidence for election, we will find that one of the key aspects of this doctrine is that we are said to be chosen "in Christ," who is, as Calvin puts it, the mirror of our election.<sup>3</sup>

We can summarize the relationship between articles Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen as follows: That which God decrees to do is set forth in article Sixteen (election and reprobation). The execution of that decree in the form of a covenant of grace is described in Article Seventeen. The way in which the covenant of grace is fulfilled is through the incarnation of our Lord is described in Article Eighteen. You cannot have election without a covenant of grace. And there is no doctrine of election nor is there redemption from sin without the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Our election in Christ and our redemption in Christ are all necessarily connected, which is why our confession introduces them in order.

In Article Sixteen our confession sets forth a summation of the biblical teaching regarding divine election and reprobation without attempting to resolve any difficulties or controversies.

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<sup>2</sup> Beets speaks of election as the "very heart of Reformed doctrine." (Cf. Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 131). But I think Article Seventeen gets more to the heart of Reformed doctrine, with the execution of God's decree in redemptive history with the covenant of grace. Election is the foundation of the covenant of grace, but the Bible itself is primarily concerned with the outworking of the divine decree.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, Institutes, III.xxiv.5.

Our confession makes the following assertion, setting out the main elements of the doctrine of divine election. “We believe that—all Adam’s descendants having thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of the first man—God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just. He is merciful in withdrawing and saving from this perdition those whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable counsel, has elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works.” The essence of the election of fallen sinners unto salvation is a manifestation of divine mercy.

While we always need to be careful when talking about God “decreeing” things in a certain order (i.e. step one, step two, step three), because God is not bound by time and space as we are, nevertheless, we can speak of God doing things in a logical order, especially so when the Bible speaks of these matters as occurring in a particular sequence. The fact that our confession presupposes the fall of the human race into sin when introducing the topic of divine election, clearly demonstrates that the Belgic Confession is infralapsarian in its orientation.

The term infralapsarian is a combination of two words—*infra* (meaning under) and *lapis* (meaning “the fall”). According to infralapsarians, when God chooses to save some of Adam’s fallen race, he is choosing them with the specific intention of rescuing people who are considered from the point of view of the fall and their sin, including original sin (in Adam) and the actual sins which we commit which spring forth from fallen sinful nature.<sup>4</sup> Because God is merciful, he chooses to save a multitude of Adam’s fallen children so vast they cannot be counted, while, at the same time he leaves the others to suffer the consequences of their sins (reprobation). Election is God’s choice of those sinners whom he will save. Reprobation is, as our confession puts it, a matter of divine justice, and is God’s “He is just in leaving the others in their ruin and fall into which they plunged themselves.” The elect are those chosen by God. The reprobate are those passed over by God (those not chosen). The one group (the elect) gets mercy. The other group (the reprobate) gets justice.

This approach is quite different from that taken by those who are supralapsarians—(*supra*, meaning above) and *lapis* (meaning the fall). On the supralapsarian approach, God decrees to save certain individuals and then reprobate others, and only then does he decree to create these people and bring about the fall so as to effectuate his prior decree. While this debate is beyond the scope of this exposition, not only does the Belgic Confession take an overtly infralapsarian approach, so do the Canons of Dort, written in 1618-19 to respond to the challenge raised against the Dutch Reformed by the Arminians and who based election upon foreknowledge.<sup>5</sup> When considered as a whole, I think infralapsarianism not only makes better sense of the biblical data, it avoids one of the unfortunate by-products of supralapsarianism, the appearance of God being the author of evil.

After affirming the fact that Adam’s sin was in view when God decided whom he would save, our

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussion of this in: B. B. Warfield, “Predestination in the Reformed Confessions,” in Studies in Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), especially pages 228-231.

<sup>5</sup> Beets, unfortunately, speaks of attempting to settle this debate as “vain and unsatisfactory” and that we should instead focus upon the admonition of 2 Peter 1:10, to make our calling and election sure. Beets, it must be pointed out, was writing during the heights of the debate in the Christian Reformed Church, which led to the ouster of Herman Hoeksema over this question and the related matters of common grace and the universal offer of the gospel. (See Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 133-134.) P. Y. DeJong does not address the subject. Cf. The Church’s Witness to the World, 15-33.

confession makes the point that election is the manifestation of God's mercy. Given what Adam's fall into sin did to himself and to us all, God would have been perfectly just to destroy the world and start over. He could have sent Adam, as well as all of us into eternal perdition (hell). God had every right to do so. And yet, our confession makes plain one of the fundamental facts of biblical revelation which cannot be overlooked. God is merciful and his mercy—not our goodness—moved him to choose and save a countless multitude of sinners from that sentence of death which hangs over all our heads. This, then, must be kept in view when we speak of election. God is merciful. Therefore, he chooses to save some of those who actually deserve his justice. Those whom he does not choose, get what they deserve. As B. B. Warfield once put it, “the marvel of marvels is not that God in his infinite love has not elected all of this guilty race to be saved, but that he has elected any.”<sup>6</sup>

Election of sinners in Jesus Christ is taught throughout the New Testament. Election is one of the main themes of the gospel of John. In John 6:37, our Lord speaks of a group given to him by the Father (the elect), which is his duty to redeem. Jesus says in this regard, “*all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*” And then when the crowds seek Jesus out to make him king—only because he has miraculously fed them while in the desert—Jesus drives these seekers away with what Bob Godfrey once called our Lord's “church shrinkage seminar.” Jesus ran-off the lookeys by teaching election. Says Jesus: “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*” When the crowd complained that this was a hard teaching, we read in John 6:65-70 that

[Jesus] said, “*This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*” After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “*Do you want to go away as well?*” Simon Peter answered him, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*” Jesus answered them, “*Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.*”

We too may find Jesus' words difficult to accept. But where else do we go? Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. Jesus tells us that we haven't chosen him, but that he has chosen us.

Whenever election and reprobation are mentioned, we must turn to the words of the apostle Paul. In Romans 9:16, Paul makes the very point which our confession is setting forth. Salvation, Paul says, “*so then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*” In 2 Timothy 1:9, the apostle states that through the power of the gospel, God “*saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.*” And then there are the famous words of Romans 8:29-30. “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*”

The fact of divine election of fallen sinners unto salvation, based upon God's mercy toward them, is an inescapable part of biblical revelation.

To show the lengths to which some will go to avoid the clear teaching of Scripture, consider for a

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<sup>6</sup> Cited from Blanchard, Gathered Gold, 78.

moment the case of Acts 13:48, where we read that after the gospel had been preached, “*and when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*” Luke tells us that all those appointed (chosen by God) believed when they heard the gospel. God has not only ordained the ends (who will be saved), but the means (the preaching of the gospel). Consider how the *Living Bible* (TLV) renders this verse: “*when the Gentiles heard this they were very glad and rejoiced in Paul’s message, and as many as wanted eternal life believed.*” **Wanted** eternal life? The *Living Bible* was for years the most widely read version of the Bible (a paraphrase) among evangelicals. Americans are so put off by the doctrine of election that they will gladly accept such a horrible distortion of what the text of Scripture actually teaches.

If people find election offensive, they are really upset by reprobation—God’s decision to pass over the non-elect and leave them to the consequences of Adam’s sin as well as their own. But this too is the clear teaching of Scripture. According to Peter (1 Peter 2:8), Jesus is “*a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.*’ *They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*” And then there are the sobering words of Romans 9:19-22, when Paul’s readers are objecting to this very doctrine. Paul writes,

*You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.*

While this may offend us, the fact of the matter is, if we are all sinners in Adam (guilty for his sins as well as our own), then who are we to complain? Cannot God (who created all things and ordained all things) do whatever he wishes with his creatures—sinful creatures at that? Yes, he can. And he does! While this is a difficult doctrine, we cannot escape the fact that it is taught in the Bible. We are certainly not permitted to distort the biblical text to avoid things we don’t like. The Bible is clear and our confession accurately summarizes the biblical teaching that God manifests his mercy when he chooses particular sinners (election) and he manifests his justice when he passes over others (reprobation). The fact is, God is God. And we must bow our knee before him and state with Job, “do with me what you will.”

Given the difficulties and the wonder of this doctrine what application should we take with us?

The most important thing to glean from this doctrine is the fact that divine election is the foundation of our salvation. We believe in Jesus Christ right now because God chose us in Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world. The only reason we have been called through the preaching of the gospel, given the new birth, brought to faith and repentance, justified and sanctified, and that we will be glorified, is because God is merciful. There is nothing good in us which causes God to save us. This completely eliminates foreknowledge as the basis for election. As we have seen, this was not the case for Israel, and it is not the case for us. As Charles Spurgeon once put it, “I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I would never have chosen him; and I am sure that he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterward!”<sup>7</sup> Unless we grasp this point,

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, 78.

we will never be able to live lives of gratitude before God.

Second, our election is “in Christ.” You cannot separate election from that one in whom we are elect. This is why the pastoral problem associated with election—“how do I know if I am one of the elect?”—has an answer. Because I trust in Jesus Christ, I can be certain that I was “chosen in Christ” from before the foundation of world. The one who chooses us, is that one who lived for us, died for us, and was raised for us. The one who chose us, is also the mediator of the covenant of grace. There is no way to separate election from the person and work of Christ, and this is why the author of our confession arranged articles Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen, as he has done.

Given the fact that we live in an increasingly pagan and anti-Christian environment where everyone seems to have become a law unto themselves and that they do what is right in their own eyes (not in God’s), can you think of a doctrine which the church must confess to the unbelieving world any more than the doctrine of divine election? Every non-Christian in America needs to hear the words, “God is God and you are not.” Yes, God is merciful—and his mercy to us is wonderful beyond measure. But he is also just. How do you know whether you will face the merciful God or receive God’s justice? What have you done with Jesus Christ, that one in whom we have been chosen? Do you trust in him for your salvation? If so, God has already been merciful to you. If not, as of this moment, you have been both summoned to faith, as well as warned of the judgment yet to come. Amen!