
Pro Rege

Volume 48 | Number 1

Article 4

September 2019

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Recommended Citation

McDonald, Suzanne (2019) "Re-Presenting Election: The Church for the World in the Canons and Beyond," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 1, 17 - 26.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss1/4

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Re-Presenting Election: The Church for the World in the Canons and Beyond



by Suzanne McDonald

All of us here at this conference are already intrigued by and have already thought a bit about the doctrine of election, but I wonder what your experience of the “e” word has been in your various contexts outside of the conference, the “e” word, of course, being election—the doctrine of election rather than the political version—but I wonder if your experience of talking (or not talking!) about both has been similar. Over the years I’ll admit to having become rather wary about the effect that

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mentioning the theological “e” word will have on people. I have a very unscientific observation about that, which is that this doctrine tends to elicit one of two very elemental responses in many of us: flight or fight, basically. Election tends to be that kind of a doctrine. It gets the adrenalin going one way or another.

First the *flight* thing—the topic of election comes up, and you can just see the apprehensive, “get me out of here!” look that comes into some people’s eyes as they do the conversational equivalent of backing away *very* fast. For some people the doctrine of election is clearly the theological equivalent of death, sex, and politics all rolled into one. You just *do not* mention it in polite theological company.

And then there’s the other kind of response. Election comes up, and someone’s eyes light up, and then before you know it they are on tiptoe, in your face, spoiling for a fight on Calvinism vs. Arminianism vs. universalism and so on. In particular, there’s a certain way of being Reformed that seems to define itself by nothing else other than election—never mind that there are so many more aspects to what it means to be theologically Reformed, and so many more aspects about even a Reformed doctrine of election—than planting doctrinal TULIPs in your theological garden.

And that brings me to some important pieces of background on the Canons of Dordt. If you’ve been listening to the plenaries so far and as many of the excellent papers as you can fit in, you’ll have picked up a good sense of the nature and purpose

of the Canons by now, if you didn't know already, so I'm going to be brief, but I need to remind us of a couple of things again.

I can't stress enough that the Canons of Dordt are **not** a summary statement of everything it means to be theologically Reformed. Anyone who tries to infer that is just plain wrong, and the writers of the Canons themselves would be the first to tell them so. They would send us to the Belgic Confession for that. The Canons are extremely limited in their intent. They are written precisely, explicitly, and only to rebut the five very specific points raised about election by the Arminians. So yes, in case you ever wondered, this means that the only reason the Canons have five points is that the Arminian Remonstrance, to which the Canons are responding, had, you guessed it, five points. So there wouldn't be the horribly misnamed "five points of Calvinism" if there hadn't been the five points of Arminianism first.

And because of this very, very limited polemical intent of the Canons, we need to add that the Canons aren't even a summary statement of everything that needs to be said about a Reformed doctrine of election. Calvin—and every other Reformed theologian in the 16th and 17th centuries—had a lot more to say about election than the issues raised in the Canons, and, of course, the conversation about election has continued within Reformed theology down the centuries since the Canons. So, the Canons are not the first, last, or only word the Reformed have uttered about the doctrine, and they do not remotely touch on everything that needs to be said about election if we are going to be fully scriptural about it. But that's OK because they don't pretend to do that. So many problems arise when we take the Canons and turn them into something they were never intended to be: the be-all and end-all of what it means to be theologically Reformed, and/or a full and final summary of the whole Reformed doctrine of election—just NO. We don't honor the Canons by trying to make them what they are not. There was, and there is, much more to be said about being theologically Reformed, and about a Reformed understanding of election, than just "why we are not Arminians."

Even so, while there IS more to be said, and

most of the rest of the paper will be pointing us towards some of that scriptural *more*, the theological demarcation lines given to us in the Canons remain crucial for a Reformed understanding of election. There are scriptural and theological principles here that all Reformed theologians down the centuries agree on, even when they come at the issues rather differently than the Canons, and even when they draw rather different inferences from those in the Canons. So in a moment, I will give you a summary of the theological core of the Canons to which Reformed theologians down the centuries, from Calvin to the Canons, Amyraut to John Owen, and even Schleiermacher and Barth could all say "Amen." A heads-up, though: I will not use the infamous and thoroughly weaponized acronym, TULIP. While I'm 100% on board with the theological foundations of what TULIP is trying to convey, it does not do justice to the Canons, and at least three of the terms—total depravity, limited atonement, and irresistible grace—are so deeply misleading that it takes longer to try to undo the damage from bad explanations of them than it does to try to present the positive theology they are intended to teach.

I don't think we're going to get rid of the acronym any time soon, but in a small act of defiance, here is my summary of the key theological themes of the Canons in a way that is less snappy than TULIP but also less misleading.

First, election is **eternal**. That canon is pretty uncontroversial. No matter how people understand other aspects of election, almost everyone agrees that whatever election is, it is from before the foundation of the world, as the letter to the Ephesians puts it. This is actually a major statement to make, though, because it's a reminder that election is at the core of God's purposes from all eternity. That's one of the reasons why it's not a good idea to ignore it.

The next three points, though, are distinctively Reformed. No Arminian could agree with these.

So, the second point is that **election is unconditional**—it is grounded in God's sovereign choice, not based on anything about us. As we were reminded in the last plenary, this is especially a rebuttal of the Arminian position that God foresees someone's faith and bases his electing on that. (If

you want to track with TULIP, pretty obviously, that's the U).

Third, **no one can turn to God without the Spirit's effectual enabling.** We can't come to acknowledge God, we can't come to faith in Christ, on our own. It is the gift of God. The problem of sin is such that we are and will remain incapable of responding to God until he opens our eyes and our ears to him. We need to be set free by God for God. And by the *effectual enabling* of the Spirit, we Reformed mean that we need the Spirit to personally, specifically, and efficaciously work in and for us to enable us to turn to God; and when he does, he doesn't leave us in some sort of neutral spot. We are set free such that we freely and joyfully choose to turn to God in faith. (T and I if you are keeping track.)

Fourth, **Christ's atoning work achieves and secures salvation.** When we say that Christ's work *achieves salvation*, we mean that it does not simply create the *possibility* of salvation that we then complete by mustering up faith and sticking with it. From a Reformed perspective, we can't do that because of sin, and even if we could, that would also make election conditional, and scripturally we can't go there either. We strongly maintain that scripture says election is unconditional, and that faith is not something we *add* to what Christ has done. Faith is the gift by which we *appropriate* the salvation he has achieved. And when we say that Christ's work *secures* salvation, we mean that if we are united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, then nothing and no-one can snatch us from the Father's hand. (These are the theological points behind L and P.)

As Reformed folks, then, we see these as bottom lines. No matter what more we want to say—and we should want to say a lot more than this—we will want to affirm that election is eternal, it is unconditional, we cannot turn to God without the Spirit's effectual enabling, and Christ's atoning work achieves and secures salvation. In these affir-

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mations, you have the essence of what the Canons of Dordt are seeking to uphold against Arminianism, and of what the full range of Reformed theologians down the centuries have agreed to be scripturally and theologically true. While there is more to be said about a Reformed approach to election than “we are not Arminians,”; it is still true that for these reasons I have summarized from the Canons, “we are not Arminians.”

But what of the so much more that needs to be said? To begin to get at that, I want to turn back to the flight or fight response to the doctrine of election I mentioned earlier. To be honest, I understand both. The theological issues raised by the Arminian Remonstrance, and the response in the Canons of Dordt, were and are extremely important, and as you will have gathered by now, I'm convinced that the Reformed instincts on all of this are scripturally and theologically correct. I will defend that position vigorously, and I confess that I can get pretty riled up when I do. I get the fight thing.

But I also understand how the worst of the fight response—theological pit bulls mauling Scripture and one another over a TULIP—and also the sometimes labyrinthine debates that arise about predestination and free will (the latter usually very badly defined, by the way, as Jamie Smith hinted yesterday) lead some folks to wish the whole thing would just go away. Isn't this a doctrine that is more trouble than it's worth? Add to this that the doctrine has had deeply damaging and sometimes horrific consequences for people's lives. As we have heard already in this conference, scripturally, and at its best theologically, this doctrine is one of deep assurance—not arrogance but consolation and assurance. Even so, it has left some spiritually tormented, questioning their salvation and torturing themselves by trying to prove their election. The backdrop to the Canons themselves is that disputes about the doctrine were so caught up in political

maneuvering that the doctrine nearly caused a civil war in the Netherlands. And it's a doctrine that has been abused in many, many ways, including the colonial conquest of native peoples here and around the world and playing a significant role in the development of the system of apartheid in South Africa, and including being part of embedded racism in various Reformed denominations in this country. With a history like that, I also understand the *flight* response, when people want to ask, "Wouldn't it be better if we just quietly locked this mad doctrine up in the theological attic?"

Not surprisingly, my answer to that question is "NO." I honestly think that we all need to say *a lot more* about election. You see, whether our response to the mention of this doctrine of election is flight or fight, I think *all* of us tend to say way too little about election. *All* of us.

If you are a flight person—if your first instinct is to want to flee the room whenever the subject is mentioned—that's a problem because the concept of election is absolutely central to Scripture. We simply *cannot* speak of how the promises and purposes of God will unfold without talking about election. And what's more, we can't even begin to talk about what it means to be the people of God—what it means to be the church, and what we are all called to be and do in our local congregations—without talking about election. We mustn't avoid this doctrine if we want to honor the story that God tells in scripture.

So, flight won't do. But if our first instinct is to relish a fight over the controversial aspects of the doctrine, then we are still saying far too little about election in another kind of way. The controversies have always been about the individual salvation side of the doctrine, which means that for many, this has become almost the sole focus of the doctrine, the only thing that election is *about*. The trouble with that is, if we want to reflect the whole biblical picture of election, then individual election in Scripture is only a relatively small part of it. That is why I think that even election *fight* people, even the ones who never seem to stop talking about the doctrine, often end up saying far too little about it.

So, what I am going to offer in the rest of this paper is an approach to election that helps us situate the kinds of Reformed priorities that we see in

the Canons of Dordt within the scriptural big picture of election. This isn't at all to *replace* what we usually think of as a Reformed understanding of election. It is to say that what we normally think of relates to one small section of the scriptural witness on election, which means we still have so much more to talk about, and because of the kinds of controversies summed up by the Canons of Dordt, we very rarely do.

It is this bigger scriptural picture that will enable us to see more clearly what election calls us to be and to do, rather than seeing election primarily as a fighting doctrine, or a doctrine about defending our theological identity against all comers. The polemical nature and purpose of the Canons mean that they are primarily about the latter, and they needed to be, but even the Canons point us towards the wider implications of the calling of the elect in and for the world. Even the Canons push us towards saying the scriptural *more* about election than they were able to say.

For the rest of my time, I'm simply going to draw out two among the many big ideas that swirl around the concept of election in Scripture. I'm not making any claims that the ideas I'll share here are *the* way to approach the subject of election from a biblical perspective. That is one of the biggest mistakes in the history of the doctrine—singling out one theme and saying this IS what the doctrine of election is all about. So, in the theological fist fights about the doctrine, we often hear things like this *Election is corporate, not individual. Election is individual, not corporate. Election is about salvation, not ministry and mission. Election is about ministry and mission, not salvation.* If we're going to be scriptural about it, election is quite obviously about all of these things and more besides. So, I'm simply going to suggest a couple of overarching themes that strike me as potentially very fruitful, in terms of how the rubber of this doctrine might hit the road of our Christian walk and the life of our churches, and that help us to hold together some of the themes that I have just mentioned. Those of you who are alert to such things will hear many echoes of several British scholars—the missional theologian Lesslie Newbiggin and two NT scholars, Richard Bauckham and N. T. Wright.

The first theme I'd like us to think about is that

from the outset, one primary aspect of God's electing is *to further his purposes of blessing beyond the elect community.*

And the second theme is that belonging to the elect community includes *the call to represent God to others and others to God.*

To show you the role of these themes in the scriptural account of election, I'm going to tell you a story. It's one you know incredibly well. It is the big-picture story of the whole of Scripture. But I'm going to tell it through the lens of election, with these two themes in mind. I'm doing this to remind all of us that election is not simply the story of how some people get saved. Election is the story of the whole of God's promises and purposes for all of creation. And that is why we have to talk about it, and when we do, we have to talk about more than just Calvinism vs. Arminianism.

As I tell this story, the focus at the start will be on Israel and then on Jesus, because that's where we see set out for us in Scripture the pattern of election into which the church is then also called. So, as I'm describing themes in relation to Israel and Jesus, I'm hoping you'll start having some "Aha!" moments about what this might mean for us as individuals and as the body of Christ. Towards the end, I'll make some connections along those lines.

To get a sense of the big scriptural picture of election, we actually need to start right back at the first chapters of Genesis. When Old Testament scholars talk about the image of God—about what human beings were created to be and to do—one of the most important themes that many of them point out is that human beings are called to represent God in and to the rest of creation. As the only creatures that God has chosen to be in a unique relationship with himself, we are called partly to mediate something of the presence of God in and to the world, and to be his vice-regents, the agents and instruments of his purposes for the whole of creation. That's the ideal, the intention. That is what human beings are created and set apart to be and to do.

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But sin—being out of right relationship with God—messes up our capacity to represent God and disrupts the trajectory that God desires for human beings and the whole of creation. The first 11 chapters of Genesis help us to see that very clearly. These are the large-scale chapters—about the creation of the world as a whole, about human beings as a whole, about the universal effects of sin. Then all of a sudden something remarkable and puzzling happens. *Election* happens—the election of Abram, to be precise, and through him, the people of Israel. After the wide angle lens of Genesis 1-11,

from Genesis 12 onwards the entire focus of the Old Testament is narrowed down first onto one man and then through him onto one people, Israel.

The point of Genesis 12 in the structure of the book of Genesis is actually to show us God's response to the problem of sin. Genesis

12 shows us that election is the method God has chosen to refuse to allow sin to derail his purpose of blessing. Among other things, God's foundational promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 shows us that God's election of Abram, and through him, Israel, is God's chosen means *to continue to further his purposes of blessing in the face of human rebellion against him.* In other words, one of the major answers to the question *What is God's eternal election all about?* is not simply *Saving some people!* It is much bigger than that. It is all about sin not derailing God's intentions for human beings, and indeed for creation as a whole.

So, I can't emphasize strongly enough that in electing one person and through him, one people, God is NOT therefore giving up on everyone and everything else and washing his hands of everyone except the little huddle of his chosen people. It is incredibly important to say that, because sadly, for many people, that *is* in fact what they think election is all about, and the sometimes grim history of the abuse of the doctrine horrifically demonstrates why they might think that.

Election actually means totally the opposite. God is singling out a chosen people *for the sake of*

everyone and everything else. It is the elect one for the sake of the many. In the foundational election text of Genesis 12, Abram, and then Israel, will be the means of bringing God's blessing beyond Israel to the nations—judgment too, but the overwhelming priority in this text is blessing. There are many and varied strands in the Old Testament concerning the relationship between the other nations and Israel and God, but this one is foundational. It is a golden thread that we can follow to Jesus, the one in whom all God's promises find their Yes and Amen.

Intrinsic to election, then, from the beginning is that first theme I mentioned: being called to be an instrument to bring blessing beyond the elect community. As the one people who know the promises and the purposes of God, the elect are called to be the bearers and instruments of God's promises and purposes in the world.

Part of living out that calling is the second theme I mentioned. It is to fulfill a task that should have been all of humanity's as God's image-bearers: to represent God in and to the world. This representational task now devolves especially on to the elect people of God, the ones who are in covenant relationship with him. They are set apart to represent something of God's character in the world and to be mediators of his presence. They alone are the ones who truly know who God is and how we should live before him, they are in covenant relationship with him, and they are the ones to whom he has revealed his promises and his purposes. Ideally, then, Israel is called to be God's people in order to show, simply by their relationship with God and with others, what the one true God is like and how we are called to live before him.

This gives us something of a sense of the *representing God to others* side of things. What about election as representing others to God, though? How does Israel do that? Well, this idea is only really present by inference in the Old Testament. It only becomes clearer as we look at Jesus. But even in the Old Testament, some scholars point to hints of this in the designation of Israel as a "kingdom of priests" in Exodus 19. That is the "royal priesthood" terminology taken up in 1 Peter to refer to the church. And the hint here is that perhaps God's elect people have a *priestly* role—a representational and mediating role—towards the other nations, as

a kind of bridge that would make communion between God and all peoples possible.

But the scriptural story shows us that Israel can't do any of this fully. Israel is as much affected by sin as all the other nations. This leads us to one other very important way that we can think of Israel as representing others to God. It is because Israel in some ways represents in itself the whole situation of humanity—created for self-conscious, loving, obedient relationship with God, but because of sin, unable to sustain their side of the relationship. That's the whole story of the Old Testament from Genesis 12 onwards in a nutshell.

And this is where Jesus comes in—as Israel's *representative* Messiah. We always need to remind ourselves of the significance of the eternal Son coming to us as a member of his own covenant people. Jesus is both sides of the covenant in person. He is the unshakably faithful covenant God in person, still working in and through his election of Israel to bring about the promised wider blessing that has been the intention of his election of Israel from the outset. And Jesus is the perfectly faithful human covenant partner who walks in total love and perfect obedience towards the Father in the way that human beings in general and the elect people in particular were created and called to do but could not do because of sin. He is perfect Israel. And if you remember, part of Israel's election includes representatively sharing in the messed-up situation of the whole of humanity, on the rest of humanity's behalf. Jesus takes on all of that. He is the one who takes on the sins of the world, precisely because he takes on all that Israel is and represents in its election.

When it comes to spelling out the representational side of this purpose even further, very obviously he is the eternal Son in person, so Jesus uniquely represents God to us. But also, we don't have to think about it for too long to realize that at the core of what he comes to be and to do is to represent others to God—very specifically, all those who are alienated from God. All he does from his coming amongst us through his ministry to his death and resurrection he does for our sake on our behalf in our place, representing us. So, you could say that Christ most fully represents who God is to us—the outgoing, self-giving love of the Triune

God—by representing the alienated other to God.

What all of this means is that in Scripture, election—on God’s side and on the human side—culminates in Jesus himself. In and through Israel’s representative election, culminating in Israel’s representative Messiah, God brings about exactly what he promised with regard to election in the first place: blessing *for* and *through* and *beyond* the elect community.

What all of this also means is that the New Testament redraws the boundaries of the elect community. As I’ve said, Jesus *is* the whole of the covenant in person—the covenant-faithful electing God and the perfectly faithful human covenant partner. So, following the death and resurrection of Christ, to be *in covenant*—to be a member of the elect community—is the same as being *in Christ*. And as the New Testament makes clear, we come to be *in Christ* only by the Spirit through faith, Jew and Gentile alike. Whoever has faith in Jesus belongs to the elect community.

It is basically how people interpret *this* one part of election that lies at the heart of the Reformed/Arminianism disputes, and so of the Canons of Dordt. The disputes at the heart of the Synod of Dordt hinge on the different answers given to the question “What is the source of faith?” Is it by the grace of God that all people are in a neutral situation where they are able to come to faith in Christ if they so choose—a graced but autonomous choice, as Arminianism would have it? Or to go back to one of my points earlier, are we incapable of turning to God without the Spirit’s effectual enabling, which is what all of us who are Reformed will maintain?

As you will have gathered from my remarks earlier, I’m convinced that the latter is correct, but thinking about the broad sweep of election in the context of the big picture story of Scripture helps us to realize that these issues are only one part of what election is all about. And while election in Christ most certainly *does* involve how we understand individual salvation, scripturally speaking, election can never be *reduced* to a way of accounting for in-

dividual salvation. As I said earlier, it has in view the entire of God’s purposes for the whole created order. Thinking about these broader contours of election helps us to realize that there is much more to election than the disputes that divide us, and that we all have far more of the big scriptural picture of election in common than we tend to think.

And so, picking up on this big picture, as those who have faith in Christ, however, we differ on how we think that comes about: the elect community of the church steps into the same basic pat-

tern and purpose of election that has characterized Israel and Israel’s representative Messiah, Jesus.

This means that once again we need to keep at the forefront that election is fundamentally for the sake of *furthering God’s purpose of blessing beyond the elect com-*

munity. From the promise of God to and through Abram to the redeeming seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, election has always been for the one who might be seen as *other*. The elect community of the church is to conform to that pattern too, as a channel of God’s blessing for those who apparently lie outside the promises of God.

As I’ve been saying all along, election was never about God choosing one group of people in order to abandon everyone else. That means that against all the subtle and not so subtle temptations in the opposite direction, the church can never conceive of itself as existing for its own sake. I think it is helpful to remind ourselves quite frequently that, scripturally speaking, the visible community of the church is NOT the sole focus of God’s purposes in election. To put it bluntly, the way of thinking about election that I am describing here reminds us that a large part of the reason why the church exists is for the sake of everyone else who is currently outside the church. And that has been the pattern all along: the chosen one for the sake of the alienated many.

What about the representational dynamic that goes with this understanding of election, and the mediating role of the elect community? What does it mean to say that a defining aspect of our election

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I'm guessing that the idea of representing God to others is one we can all grasp fairly easily. You might not have thought about *election* in these terms before, but the concept is one we're all familiar with.

So, simply by being who we are as individual Christ-followers and as church communities, by seeking to live out of our relationship with Christ, we hope and pray that we show something of character of God in Christ to those who encounter us, even though that is always going to be only partial and flawed.

Then very obviously, we represent who God is to others by quite literally getting out there and telling people about him—his promises, his purposes, his character—as we have come to know all of these things in Christ. The church is the only community in the world where as much as can be known of the fullness of God's promises and purposes is known, and through which that is mediated. No other people know and taste the reality of what God has done in Christ, and can make known and share something of the redemption and reconciliation won in Christ.

The Canons of Dordt has one of the clearest and best expressions of this representation in all of the Reformed standards. It's quoted in the program book, and you've heard it many times by now. We are called to proclaim the gospel indiscriminately—promiscuously—to all. To quote a slightly different version of the Canons, the gospel “ought to be announced and declared without differentiation and without discrimination to all nations and people.”¹

So much for the common assertion that a so-called *Calvinist* approach to election dampens mission. If you were at the panel chaired by Rich Mouw with Bill DeJong and Sean Michael Lucas, that misrepresentation was well and truly put to rest there as well. Calvin is clear, and the Canons are clear that we are to get out there and share the good news of Jesus and the kingdom with anyone and everyone, in season and out of season. And as that session also emphasized, the doctrine of election gives absolutely NO right to decide in advance that this or that person—or this or that group of people—is outside the reach of God's salvation. Instead we are encouraged to hold out good hope

for everyone we encounter. We cannot know when the Holy Spirit might illumine even the most unlikely-seeming person's heart and mind, and set them free to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. While the Canons are clear that some will be saved and others will not (And by the way, all who are not universalists would share that view—they would simply differ on how this comes about.), to put it very provocatively, the overall approach of the Canons means that we are actually called to be functional universalists. That is to say, it may be true that not all will be saved, but we cannot make assumptions about any particular persons from what we see of them and their circumstances. We have no right to assume anything other than that every person we encounter is someone whom God will draw to himself in good time.

So representing God to others happens in relatively unselfconscious ways as we live out our lives as Christian individuals and together, as well as very intentional ways such as sharing the gospel with others. The rather harder concept for us to get our heads around, I think, is the second half of the representational dynamic—representing others to God. What does it mean to say that we are called to represent others to God?

Well, there is one very important and obvious way that I hope you and I do this every single day and that I hope is part of every single corporate act of worship that we attend or lead, and that is intercessory prayer. As we pray for others, we are representing others to Christ. This is especially the case when we hold up those who are as yet alienated from God, who aren't yet believers or who have drifted away from Christ. We are effectively standing in for them before God, provisionally, in their place. We are standing on their behalf where, for the moment at least, they can't be for themselves.

Now, without a doubt, Jesus is the one true Intercessor, upper case I. In this secondary priestly work of ours, we aren't trespassing on his sole High Priesthood. We are doing what we do at his invitation and command. Jesus commands us to pray for others, including our enemies. That is a profound and beautiful thing. Our intercessions, in all their flawed and broken inadequacy, are graciously taken up and purified by the Spirit to be joined to Christ's. This means that our prayers aren't remotely need-

ed to *complete* Christ's, but neither are our prayers redundant. Instead, it is the most amazing gift of grace that those who are in Christ by faith are given to participate in his priestly work. Intercessory prayer is a really helpful model that allows us to think more widely about how the elect community may represent others to God, not in place of Christ or in addition to Christ but in dependence upon and with Christ.

So, intercessory prayer is one way to help us think about what it means to represent others to God. Here's a second. Think of this as an extension of the pattern of election that I described in relation to Israel. If you remember, one facet of Israel's election was that it represented the whole human situation before God—created for right relationship with God and yet unable to maintain that relationship. That is true of the church too, now in the light of what Christ has done. Just by being the people who, on the one hand, are reconciled to the Father in Christ by the Spirit but, on the other, still share in the brokenness and rebellion of the world too, the church represents the whole human situation in itself, and in its own brokenness it holds the brokenness of others representatively before God.

I think this point is very important because it helps us to be brutally honest about ourselves and our churches. Yes, we are the elect community in Christ, but there's no room for arrogance or complacency in that. We know we are still broken, and my goodness do we show that in our own lives, in our church life, and as we engage with those outside the church. That is both our sin and our shame, but it is also an element within our election, and a very significant one. That is not to minimize our sin—sin is always magnified for the elect because they are the ones who know God and what he has done for us and what he asks of us—but to emphasize the reality that we too share in the sinfulness of humanity as a whole: that is part of the representational dynamic of election from the beginning. We stand before God as his chosen but sinful people, and we stand there on behalf of all those who still live in rebellion against and alienation from him. The elect community stands before God on behalf

of all those who as yet do not know him but whose need of him is the same as our need of him.

In addition to intercessory prayer, and the way that the church holds the whole human situation in itself, here is a third way to help us to get our heads around something of what it means to say that the church is called to represent others to God. In this in-between time, because election is Christ-shaped it must therefore also be cross-shaped. For the sake of God's purposes of blessing and reconciliation and restoration, Christ took upon himself

the whole pain and shame and grief of what it means for human beings to be alienated from God. As part of the working out of the implications of his redemption until his coming again,

We are called to proclaim
the gospel indiscriminately—
promiscuously—to all.

one aspect of the church's calling needs to be to look for those places and circumstances in which injustice and pain and grief and shame and alienation from God still dominate, and to be present in the midst of that, taking on something of the burden of that, and seeking to be instruments of something of God's coming kingdom of justice, love, redemption, and reconciliation. Just as is the case with intercessory prayer, we don't do this because somehow Christ's work is incomplete until we pitch in with our bit. Rather, the privilege and responsibility of the elect community is a calling to play our part in the unfolding of Christ's completed work between his ascension and his coming again.

What this means is that solidarity with and action with and for others, Christian or not, should be *intrinsic to the church's understanding of its election*. By the Spirit we are called and enabled to seek to be channels of God's presence and instruments of God's healing and blessing in situations where brokenness seems to prevail, even as we need to acknowledge our own brokenness in the midst of that too. Election costs, folks. Election hurts. We saw that pain in Israel and supremely in Jesus Christ. Why on earth would we think that our calling in this time between Christ's ascension and coming again would be any different?

That is hard, for many, many reasons. One is that as individuals and as church communities we often do not want to move towards situations like

that. They make demands on us. They threaten to change us and our settled ways of being in the world. We get defensive. We get self-protective. We want to withdraw into the security of our like-minded holy huddle. We would rather that election were not cross-shaped. But then it is still hard even when we have realized that election means that indifference and disengagement are not an option because we also have to be so wary of being that enthusiastic and well-meaning but basically colonializing church that sails into places and situations thinking that it is bringing Jesus and the kingdom along with it to *solve* all the problems and provide all the answers on everyone else's behalf. Nope. There can be neither triumphalism nor isolationism for the elect community. The pattern of election under the situation of sin always includes the brokenness of the elect people of God, and it always includes the elect people of God entering into and bearing in themselves something of the brokenness and alienation that we see around us. Again, election costs, folks. Election hurts.

So there you have it. With the idea of election as a calling to be instruments of God's blessing beyond the elect community, and to represent God to others and others to God, we have two big scriptural themes that I hope will give us some resources to help all of us to embrace a larger vision for what election might mean, in ways that don't get immediately and irretrievably bogged down in endless repetition of the debates we've been having

for centuries. Those debates are important, but they are just one small facet of what election is about in Scripture.

What I have shared with you here is rooted in and totally compatible with the Canons, but this broader approach to election is also one that anyone can take up—Reformed, Arminian, or any other denomination or non-denomination you care to name. Everyone can think about election—about what it means to be the people of God—in these big-picture, scriptural categories.

There is so much important scriptural common ground about election that we can all share. There are aspects of election that will continue to divide us until the Lord comes again in glory and shows us how we are all wrong about some things, and many of those are encapsulated in the Canons and the disputes that led up to them. But in the meanwhile, I hope the themes I've highlighted today will be fruitful ones to help all of us keep on thinking about what we are called to be and do as God's elect people in Christ.

Endnote

1. This is a translation of *The Canons of Dordt*, Second Main Point of Doctrine, Article 5: The Mandate to Proclaim the Gospel to All, in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, And Other Resources*, (Faith Alive Publishing, 2013), p. 127.