

UNFINISHED HOMEWORK:
CHARTING THE INFLUENCE OF B. HOLWERDA WITH
RESPECT TO THE DOCTRINE
OF ELECTION¹

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TRANSLATED, WITH INTRODUCTION AND EPILOGUE

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Translator's Introduction

THIS DOCTRINAL-HISTORICAL study by Erik de Boer narrates the discussion and developments within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s and beyond, involving the relationship between the doctrines of election and covenant. Spurred in part by the seminal articles written for the church public by Benne Holwerda in 1942, this ongoing debate encapsulated many of the theological issues that had surrounded the 1944 church split among the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (synodical). These issues did not disappear after 1944, however, as evidenced by the republishing of Holwerda's articles in 1953 and 1962, and by further theological writing in the 1950s and 1960s.

This brief introduction aims merely to assist the reader by explaining some of the chronology of these developments and by identifying the church groups involved in this history.

In 1834 a number of churches left the national Dutch (Hervormde) church as part of the Separation (the *Afscheiding*), a departure followed in 1886 by that of another group of churches (the *Doleantie*). Many churches from both groups merged in 1892 to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, or GKN). (One group of churches staying out of this merger was the Chris-

¹ "Huiswerk van Holwerda. Zijn invloed inzake de verkiezingsleer in kaart gebracht," by Erik de Boer, in *Holwerda herdacht. Bijdragen over leven en werk van Benne Holwerda (1909-1952)*, ed. George Harinck, AD Charta-reeks, vol. 10 (Barneveld, the Netherlands: Uitgeverij De Vuurbaak, 2005), 227-263.

tian Reformed Churches [Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, or CGK].) This merger had incorporated a number of divergent theological opinions relating to covenant, election, regeneration, and baptism, such that in 1905 an attempt was made by the GKN Synod of Utrecht to harmonize these divergent views.

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, however, these same issues continued to be debated, with prominent theologians on all sides wielding their pens in an effort to instruct and persuade the church public. The turmoil of disagreement led to calls for synodical pronouncements intended to settle things down and bring some resolution to the opposing views.

Theological debate had been occurring for more than a decade, then, when in 1944 the GKN synod deposed a number of professors and ministers, leading to the formation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) (GKNv; hereafter, Reformed Churches [Liberated]). The new group formed its own theological school in Kampen (located on Broederweg). Among this new group, B. Holwerda, S. Greijdanus, and K. Schilder belonged to the first generation of ministers and theologians, a generation that had passed from the scene by the end of 1952. To the second generation belonged men like J. Kamphuis, C. Trimp, J. R. Wiskerke, L. Doekes, W. Borgdorff, H. de Jong, and Douwe Holwerda, brother of Benne.

Already in 1957 a new periodical appeared among the Reformed Churches (Liberated), entitled *Opbouw* (*Edification*). Numerous exegetical studies published in this magazine sought to clarify the relationship between election, reprobation, and covenant. As De Boer notes in his essay, already since the 1950s areas of tension were delineated within the Liberated churches that led to another church split at the end of the 1960s, resulting in the formation of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken, or NGK; not to be confused with the Gereformeerde Gemeenten [Reformed Congregations], whose North American counterpart is called the Netherlands Reformed Church). People associated with this new group included B. Telder, G. Visee, C. Veenhof, H. de Jong, and H. Smit.

With this brief orientation, we present in English translation Erik de Boer's essay.

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WITH REGARD TO ITS DOCTRINAL ASPECT, the 1944 church split among the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands known as the Liberation involved the relationship between baptism and regeneration. As "the seed of the covenant" are children regenerated in principle through the sign and seal of baptism? In agreement with the Canons of Dort, regeneration was understood to be a powerful miracle worked by God apart from any human contribution. The "imperishable seed" of regeneration is a sign of election.

The disputed doctrinal pronouncements made in 1942 by the general synod of the Reformed Churches [GKN] meeting at Utrecht involved the

covenant of grace.² The synod attempted to formulate the relationship between election and covenant. The assurance belonging to covenant and promise cannot be formulated apart from God's election from eternity. The objectors to such a formulation placed all their emphasis on the promise of God as something reliable and therefore active within life lived in covenant. Whereas from the "synodical" side, the doctrine of election in fact remained the starting point of the debate, the doctrine of the covenant was deepened by many who refused to consider themselves bound by the doctrinal pronouncements of the Utrecht synod.

This meant that among the Reformed Churches (Liberated) the doctrine of election would require further reflection. This essay is dedicated to Benne Holwerda, who from 1945-1952 was professor of Old Testament at the Theological College (on Broederweg) in Kampen.³ As a young minister serving in Amersfoort, he had become involved in the church conflict. Early in the debate, as he concentrated on the doctrine of the covenant, he drew implications from this doctrine for one's understanding of election. The question we wish to focus on involves to what extent Holwerda had identified the unfinished homework of the Liberation and had gathered a following with his approach.

Election in Scripture

In 1942 Holwerda wrote a series of articles for the church periodical of the Reformed Church in Amersfoort, which dealt with "Election in Scripture."⁴ Earlier he had interacted with the book *Het verbond Gods* [*The Covenant of God*], written by G. Ch. Aalders, professor of Old Testament at the Free University. Aalders had defended the thesis that the sphere of the elect coincides with the sphere of "covenant members." The distinction between the "internal" covenant and the "external" covenant was employed to keep election and covenant in balance. The internal covenant coincides with the sphere of those whom God has chosen from eternity unto salvation, while the external covenant includes all those who receives the sign of baptism. The consequence of this construction, according to Holwerda, was that "the certainty of the covenant came under duress."

Holwerda did not stop there, but went on to engage the issue with which Aalders and others had begun, namely, the reality of God's choice

² See the doctrinal declarations about the covenant of grace and self-examination in J. Kamphuis, *Een eeuwig verbond* (Haarlem, 1984), 153-154 [ET: *An Everlasting Covenant*, translated by G. van Rongen (Free Reformed Churches of Australia: Launceston, TAS, Australia, 1985), 119-120].

³ R. H. Bremmer, "Holwerda, Benne," in *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme* (Kampen, 1998), 4:213-214. Holwerda had become thoroughly familiar with the theological-historical background of the doctrinal issue of the covenant of grace as a participant in a study group begun and led by D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, a group which was studying the dogmatic questions being currently debated at that time. Chapters I.iii, II, and V of pamphlet *Rondom "1905". Een historische schets* (Terneuzen, n.d.) were written by Holwerda.

⁴ *Amersfoortsch Kerkblad*, dated 7, 14, 21 June 1941 and 5, 19, 26 July 1941. I am quoting from the later republication in B. Holwerda, *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen* (Goes, 1962), 49-64.

from eternity. Holwerda began by observing the distinction in the meaning of some terms used both in dogmatics and in Scripture. In dogmatics (and, we would add, in the Confessions) the term “election” summarizes what the Bible refers to with words like “counsel,” “purpose,” “pleasure.”⁵ Holwerda set out to investigate how Scripture itself speaks about election.

First, he observed that the verb “to elect” appeared also in connection with people who made a positive, responsible choice to follow God’s way and God’s law (Ps. 25:12; 119:30, 173). Joshua could say that the people of Israel must choose the LORD (Josh. 24:22). So the Bible’s semantic range is broader than that of dogmatics. Further, Holwerda wrote about God’s act of choosing someone, such as choosing David to be king. “Already from this it is clear that whenever God’s election is described in Scripture, that word does not always refer to his eternal decree, but to God’s act within time, whereby he shows special favor to a particular person and treats that person with distinction.”⁶ This quote illustrates very well that Holwerda was not at all saying that there was no eternal plan of God serving as the basis of his choosing David. Rather, when Scripture speaks about the election of the king, all attention is directed to God’s action within time: “He took him from tending the sheep.” Samuel had also said with regard to Saul: “Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen?” (1 Sam. 10:24).

Holwerda’s thesis was that this redemptive-historical speaking about election prepared for the New Testament usage and formulation. There is a connection between God’s choosing a particular king and Israel’s being chosen as the people of God. “Here we come very close to the confession of Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21, that Christ gathers unto himself a church chosen to eternal life.”⁷ It is important to see this quote as illustrating the fact that Holwerda did not intend with his approach—which was self-consciously not dogmatic-theological—to move away from the church’s confessional language, but rather away from the theological semantic domain.

With respect to the doctrine of the covenant, Holwerda sought to associate his view with that of K. Schilder, who had been emphasizing especially the bilateral character of the covenant. “And this bilateral relationship that we call covenant owes its existence to the unilateral self-binding of God, which Scripture calls election. As the self-binding of God, election is then the historical opening act of the covenant as a relationship of mutuality.”⁸ That was Holwerda’s signal and unique contribution: within Scripture’s semantic domain, God’s election is (most often) not the eternal, but the historical act whereby God establishes his covenant, in which his people then obtain active participation. In this way, Holwerda saw himself as providing within the context of the contemporary dog-

⁵ For criticism of Holwerda’s distinction between history and dogma, see C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman (Scarsdale, NY: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1996), 130-134.

⁶ Holwerda, *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen*, 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

matic-theological discussions a strong and useful connection between election and covenant: these are both (within God's revelation in the Old Testament and for us who read Scripture) "primarily temporal-historical realities."⁹ Even when we read that "the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel" (Isa. 14:1), this involves "an ongoing repeated electing work" in salvation history.

Holwerda concluded his series of articles with a look at the New Testament. There, too, he repeatedly saw election as occurring within time. He observed an accent on election in eternity only in Ephesians 1:4 ("even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world") and in 1 Peter 1:2 ("elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father"). He went on to suggest that here, too, one could understand God's act of choosing as occurring within time.¹⁰ The bottom line is this: "Election never occurs apart from responsibility and 'Entscheidung' [decision]. This concept indeed remains anchored in the eternal, but is always historical-functional."

It is remarkable to see how resolute Holwerda was in his approach and his conclusions, while being so modest in his presentation. Even though in these church magazine articles he introduced his readers to scientific literature (citing, for example, from Kurt Galling, *Die Erwählungstraditionen Israels*, 1929 [*The Election Traditions of Israel*]), he repeatedly pointed out that "an independent study would require much more time." He concluded with a plea for cooperation between dogmatists and exegetes in order to make theological progress. He developed point by point a plan that might serve the dogmatic-theological debate within the Reformed Churches. How must we conceive of the fact that God's people are not always obedient and that some of them do not inherit salvation? Holwerda distinguished between that election within which the covenant was established, and that election within which God according to his good pleasure preserved a remnant from among the disobedient in the sphere of the covenant. Holwerda's aim was that divine election as a revealed reality would not be rendered problematic by a dogmatic-theological fixation on terms such as "regeneration," "election-from-eternity," and the like. God's eternal counsel "not only has a bearing on who will ultimately be saved, but his decree also involves all his works in their mutual connection."¹¹

Holwerda's legacy

How could such a brief series of articles, published in a local church periodical, have come to exercise such influence? The concluding article of this series indicated that the *Amersfoortsch Kerkblad* [*Amersfoort Church Magazine*] was being read among a wider circle. There Holwerda responded to questions prompted by his articles that Rev. M. Vreugdenhil of Meliskerke had formulated in the periodical *Pro Ecclesia* [*For the Church*]. The influence of Holwerda's articles increased when the editors

⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

of *De Reformatie* [*The Reformation*] republished them in 1953, one year after Holwerda's sudden death, now under the title "Election according to Scripture."¹² In addition, Holwerda's brother, Douwe Holwerda, included the series in a collection of essays, published in 1962, entitled *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen* [*Popular-scientific Essays*].¹³ These republications in 1953 and 1962 constituted something more than a pious gesture. They highlighted the need to get to work on an issue that remained on the theological agenda of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), whether they wanted it or not, and they show how Holwerda's impetus was carried forward with eagerness.

Within this context we must understand why as professor, Holwerda had brought this material up once more for discussion in his classroom lectures. In the *Dictaten* [*Lecture Notes*] published in 1954, especially in *Historia revelationis* [*History of Revelation*], part 1—the history of revelation in the Old Testament—Holwerda provided an excursus in connection with Genesis 25, dealing with the preference within God's election of Jacob over Esau.¹⁴ Once again Holwerda interacted with Aalders, speaking now after his suspension and deposition from office on the basis of the "synodocratic confession." Does Genesis 25 deal with the election of nations whereby Jacob is the father of the church (Calvin), or with instances wherein the features of God's general manner of election of persons are shown (Aalders)? Holwerda's answer was clear: with Jacob and Esau, God reveals to us not how he chooses individual persons unto salvation or rejects individual persons, but rather the struggle between two nations wherein God intervenes electingly.

Holwerda agreed with the doctrinal distinction that Calvin made between election in a general sense, such as the election of Israel as a people with all its members, and election in a special sense, namely, the election of those who are effectually saved. Genesis 25 is dealing with election in a general sense. Furthermore, Holwerda pointed to the factor of human responsibility: God intervenes electingly in the struggle between Esau and Jacob, and in them, between Israel and Edom. "God himself did not generate the struggle," for that struggle already existed. Esau is not the figure of the rejected one, but the responsible person in an historical situation.

Following Gottfried Quell, who wrote about the Greek verb *εκλεγομαι* in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Holwerda asserted that the idea of an eternal election and rejection is to be found in other biblical terms, such as *προγινωσκειν* (knowing beforehand), etc. But *εκλεγεσται* (to elect) is an act of God within time. He continued: "I must develop this idea, precisely because to Reformed ears that are far more accustomed to dogmatic-theological terms than to the language of the

¹² *De Reformatie* 28 (1952): 242, 249-251.

¹³ Holwerda, *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen*, 49-64.

¹⁴ B. Holwerda, *Dictaten*, Part 1, *Historia revelationis veteris testamenti*, first section (Kampen, 1954), 26-37. The compiler was the then current lecturer Drs. J. P. Lettinga, and the publisher was D. Holwerda. B. Holwerda began his lectures during the 1946-47 academic year on the subject of *historia revelationis* with the *toledot* of Isaac. The overview of the lecture material concluded with the announcement of the treatment of Romans 9. See *Almanak Fides Quaerit Intellectum* 1947 (Kampen, n.d.), 10.

Bible, this sounds so unreformed.”¹⁵ In connection with this, Holwerda interacted with Romans 9, “because the declaration that Holy Scripture itself supplies is always normative for us.”¹⁶ What the apostle Paul writes is no abstract truth, but stands within a concrete context, namely, the problem of Israel’s fall. The hardening of the Israel of Paul’s day appeared inconsistent with Genesis 25, where God chooses Jacob. By way of interpreting Paul’s words, “in order that God’s purpose of election [ἡ κατ’ ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις] might continue,” Holwerda wrote: God acts in his decrees according to the principle of election. That principle is not human work, but God’s call. And that, says Paul, must continue, and not be credited to man’s account (not “of works”). God calls Jacob, and that call became effective at a particular moment in time.¹⁷ “Election is historical. Just like the covenant is historical, as well. Both are spanned by the *prothesis*,” God’s purpose. But when in Paul’s day, Israel prided herself in being the firstborn, the Gentile church was given preference over Israel, so that it might remain clear that election is according to the style of God’s calling and never rests upon human works. In this way Holwerda sought to do justice to the historical situations in both Genesis 25 and Romans 9, so that the message of Scripture would not be abstracted in a dogmatic-theological way, but rather so that all the emphasis would come to rest upon God who chooses his people within real time by calling his people unto salvation.

Some of Holwerda’s students were initially baffled by his interpretation of Romans 9:11: God’s purpose (πρόθεσις) is according to the principle of election (κατ’ ἐκλογὴν). Should it not be the other way around: God’s election is according to the principle of his purpose? Did Holwerda’s interpretation really still involve God’s purpose? They took their questions to Schilder, but he refused to take a position in response to the students, and gave his junior colleague some elbow room.¹⁸

The extent to which this material continued to occupy Holwerda during his professorate is evident as well from his academic address in 1949 on the occasion of transferring the responsibilities of the school principal. His address was entitled “The place the LORD shall choose,” and in his presentation he unfolded his program in direct contrast to historical criticism with its exegesis of Deuteronomy 12.¹⁹ A generation of students sat at Holwerda’s feet, students who became leaders in the church conflict of the 1960s which led to a split among the Reformed Churches (Liberated) and to the existence of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK). Holwerda’s work made an impression on his students, but the fact that he passed away after a six-year professorate meant that his work remained incomplete. As far as the doctrine of election was con-

¹⁵ Holwerda, *Dictaten, Historia revelationis* I, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁸ This according to C. Trimp in a conversation on 17 December 2003.

¹⁹ B. Holwerda, “. . . Begonnen hebbende van Mozes. . .,” 2nd edition (Kampen, 1974), 7-29. Particularly Deuteronomy 12 was omitted in his lecture series on Deuteronomy. In B. Holwerda, *Oudtestamentische voordrachten*, Part 2, *Bijzondere canoniek* (Kampen, n.d. [1972]), Appendix 2 is devoted to Deuteronomy 12 (312-347).

cerned, Holwerda could provide no more than an inspiring beginning. His legacy consisted of a piece of unfinished homework for his students.

The earliest students

In 1950 a plan formed among Schilder's students to publish in his honor a collection of essays to commemorate his twentieth anniversary as professor in 1954. Holwerda was involved in the plan as well. But due to the sudden passing of Schilder in 1952—and a few weeks later of Holwerda—the plan was derailed. Instead, on the occasion of the centennial of the Theological College in 1954, a trilogy was produced and published by three young ministers, J. Kamphuis, C. Trimp, and J. R. Wiskerke. The doctrine of election was the governing theme of this work.²⁰ When Holwerda began his professorate in 1946, Trimp was a third-year student, while Kamphuis and Wiskerke were fourth-year students.²¹

In his 1954 publication, *Tot een levendige troost zijns volks* [*Unto a Living Comfort of His People*], Trimp interacted with the book of the Reformed (Hervormd) minister J. G. Woelderink, *De uitverkiezing* [*Election*], which had appeared in 1951. Woelderink had concluded that election from eternity appears only a few times in Scripture. But, wrote Trimp, “when we read the Scriptures in terms of their connection as Old and New Testaments, then we see the eternal election of God everywhere, *because we see God, the Eternal One, everywhere*. Please let exegesis remain free from posing any dilemma which is itself unreformed.”²² From one of his footnotes it appears that Trimp objected also to some articles of Douwe Holwerda and to the republication of “what he had quoted from professor B. Holwerda” in *De Reformatie*.²³ He referred additionally to the contribution to the trilogy being planned by Wiskerke. Trimp seemed to think that the republication of professor Holwerda's articles was incautious and was serving within a different theological climate to strengthen a particular tendency, namely, the tendency to deny the eternal counsel of God and to criticize the Canons of Dort.

²⁰ C. Trimp, *Tot een levendige troost zijns volks. Enkele beschouwingen over de leer der uitverkiezing Gods* (Goes, 1954); J. R. Wiskerke, *Volk naar Gods keuze* (Goes, 1955); J. Kamphuis, *Katholieke vastheid. Enkele opmerkingen met betrekking tot de leer der onveranderlijkheid Gods* (Goes, 1955). Regarding the history of planning this project, see J. Kamphuis, “Koers tussen de klippen door. Over de discussie inzake het thema van de verhouding tussen de eeuwige uitverkiezing en het verbond der genade binnen de Gereformeerde Kerken in de vijftiger en zestiger jaren,” in *Almanak Fides Quadrat Intellectum* 1985 (n.p., 1985), 161-162 (156-174); also published in J. Kamphuis, *Een uitgemaakte zaak* (Kampen, 1987), 94-116.

²¹ *Almanak Fides Quaerit Intellectum* 1947 (n.p., 1947), 44-45. Already in 1947, fourth-year student C. J. Breen penned a study entitled “Een weergave van en beschouwing over de remonstrantse praedestinatieleer,” which appeared in *Almanak Fides Quaerit Intellectum* 1947 and was directed against the accusation of J. Ridderbos that the Liberated Reformed had remonstrant leanings (181-212). During the 1943-44 academic year, Vollenhoven lectured in his Amsterdam home on “Isagogics” and “Survey” to a group of students, among whom were Jelle Faber, Herman Nijenhuis, Kees Trimp, and Jelier Wiskerke. See Johan Stellingwerf, *D. H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978). Reformator der wijsbegeerte* (Baarn, 1992), 153.

²² Trimp, *Tot een levendige troost*, 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, 104.

Trimp's book met with lively criticism from Rev. R. H. Bremmer, regarding the issue of the identity which Trimp had proposed between the doctrine of election and the counsel of peace (*pactum salutis*). The counsel of peace is not contained in the Reformed Confessions in so many words. It belongs to the dogmatic-theological line of thought to say that Father, Son, and Spirit decided upon the plan of salvation for humanity fallen into sin. In the *pactum salutis* the Son was appointed as mediator.²⁴ Does the counsel of peace proceed apart from Christ as mediator? In the decree of election is Christ merely the means for executing God's decree unto salvation? Trimp also wanted to do justice to the phrase "elect in Christ," and wanted to foster a renewal of the doctrine of election by having the counsel of peace coincide with the "in Christ." "People are simultaneously chosen by the Father and given unto Christ, and to the elect Christ is given as surety, mediator, and head. The Father acts, but not apart from the Son; the Son acts, but not without and apart from the Father!"²⁵ In this way Trimp wanted to place Christ at the center, also in election.

Bremmer's criticism was that Ephesians 1:4 spoke not of the Son, but of Christ. The Canons of Dort speak about Christ as "the foundation of salvation" (I.7), directing our attention once again to his work of redemption on Golgotha. Moreover, in Trimp's solution, election became a work of the Father alone, in place of a work of the triune God. Bremmer's final objection was that Trimp had in fact brought the doctrine of the covenant into the counsel of peace as well. Bremmer's sharpest criticism, then, was that this was again the same construction as that of Abraham Kuyper with regard to justification from eternity. "For here again, the assurance of faith, no matter how one twists and turns, is nevertheless based upon the assurance of being elect and not the other way around."²⁶

Trimp defended himself in *De Reformatie* by claiming that the Son and Christ belonged together in the unity of personhood.²⁷ Where Christ is mentioned, our attention may also be directed to the Son. He emphasized the preposition "in" of the phrase "in Christ" (Eph. 1:4). "In verses 3-4, Paul wants to bind upon our hearts the truth that in and through Jesus Christ, our exalted Lord, we not only share in God's present blessings, but in this same Lord we are also dealing with God's eternal loving choice." It is impossible to separate Christ's saving work from God's election. Trimp opposed any distinction that dogmatists might seek to introduce within God's counsel. "This construction has no validity, because in this construction the unity and simplicity of God's counsel, together

²⁴ See M. J. Arntzen, *Van eeuwigheid als grond gelegd. Gedachten over de vredeaad* (Kampen, 1983); B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing, verzoening, verbond. Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* ('s-Gravenhage, 1990); J. van Genderen, *Verbond en verkiezing* (Kampen, 1983), 54-55 [ET: *Covenant and Election*, translated by C. Pronk (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 59-60].

²⁵ Trimp, *Tot een levendige troost*, 46.

²⁶ R. H. Bremmer in *Petahja* 9 (1955): 45.

²⁷ C. Trimp, "Verkozen in Christus" (1-6), *De Reformatie* 31 (1955): 84-85 (criticism of D. Holwerda), 93, 99, 108-109, 115-116, 123-124 (defense against the criticism of R. H. Bremmer and J. Faber).

with the profitable results of the struggle over 'infra' and 'supra,' have far too easily been lost from view: namely, that within God's decree per se no sequence can be posited, so that the resulting payoff of this construction is far too meager." The forthrightness with which people presented their exegesis and their dogmatics in this discussion is truly remarkable. In their emphasis on the eternal God who decides, and on the unity of the decisions in God, Wiskerke and Trimp show themselves to have been students of Schilder.

Wiskerke's study, *Volk naar Gods keuze* [*A People According to God's Choice*], published in 1955, was in fact a sequel to Holwerda's project, an exegetically penetrating study of election in the Old Testament. Like Holwerda, he too dealt with the criticism of the historical development of Scripture, such as that defended by Julius Wellhausen, and in that connection referred to the work of Holwerda.²⁸ Wiskerke also arranged his study in terms of redemptive history. Remarkably he nowhere referred to Holwerda's project dealing with election. Had Holwerda's formulations been considered too incautious? The contribution of J. Kamphuis to the previously mentioned trilogy was directed especially against G. Visee, who had opposed the notion of anthropomorphic (humanlike) speech in Scripture. The immutability of God was interpreted in such a way that in terms of God's repentance, Scripture does indeed speak of change in terms of God's deeds within time. According to Kamphuis, that view touched upon the immutability of God's decree of election. Kamphuis brought Holwerda's work into the discussion at one particular point. In his outline about election, Holwerda had mentioned God's repentance in connection with the disobedience and wrath of the covenant. But in connection with the disobedience that was followed by conversion, Holwerda had not mentioned God's repentance (unto favor), whereas Kamphuis did insist that Scripture knew of God's repentance both unto favor and unto disfavor. Kamphuis also emphasized the historical route God travels with his people. But in the face of the mutability of the people, God's Word, in its promise and its warning, is immutable.

This refinement of Holwerda's project received attention in small print in a footnote. There the author said that he had no objection as such against the articles of Holwerda and their republication in 1953: "We are grateful for them for many reasons. But we do believe, now that these articles have been republished particularly in this contemporary situation, that they should be able to contribute something on this point in today's discussion."²⁹ Apart from the specific point at which Kamphuis had developed the unfinished homework of his teacher, we sense in the trilogy a certain chagrin regarding Holwerda's project whenever an appeal was made to it within a different theological configuration.

These young students of Holwerda wrote about God's election with an eye to the theological climate outside the Reformed Churches (Liberated). In 1944, in his *Kleine dogmatiek* [*Small dogmatics*], G. C. van Nif-

²⁸ Wiskerke, *Volk van Gods keuze*, 51, notes 10-12, and 90, note 41. Wiskerke in turn produced a trilogy of his own, adding to this volume *Volk van Gods roeping. Over Rom. 9:1-9 en Gal. 3:16* (Goes, 1966), and *Geroepen volk. Een studie over Rom. 9:10-29* (Goes, 1967).

²⁹ Kamphuis, *Katholieke vastheid*, 122, 161-162.

trik had popularized the thinking of Karl Barth regarding election, so that both election and reprobation were brought within Christology. In 1951 Woelderink had distanced himself from the Canons of Dort. In his 1955 volume, *De verkiezing Gods* [*Divine Election*], G. C. Berkouwer would criticize the structure of theological thought in the Canons of Dort. Holwerda's students had listened to his lectures on salvation history and had done their homework by undertaking both the exegetical and the doctrinal study their teacher had assigned them. It must have sorely irritated these students when Berkouwer referred in his *Divine Election* to B. Holwerda: "The issue is God's plan (*prothesis*), but this plan is in form and measure the principle of election (*eklogē*), and this election is not an arbitrariness in which no meaning can be discerned, but the purposeful way in which God's plan is realized in history."³⁰

In this context we must also mention the inaugural address of Schilder's successor, Dr. L. Doekes. He was announcing a program for the future when he declared that the matter of Scripture proof within the field of dogmatics must receive more focused attention. Over against a form of hyper-criticism of science he defended the thesis that Scripture does not despise logic and the language sciences in the least. Consequently, in his address entitled "Dordt tegen Barth" ["Dordt Against Barth"] he focused on the Scripture proofs in the Canons of Dort.³¹ It is interesting that Doekes mentioned logic as well, because the doctrine of reprobation is often portrayed as merely the logical conclusion arising from God's election. Did Doekes want to provide a counter-balance against the line of thinking that had developed within the Reformed Churches (Liberated), wherein resistance against theology as a science had been delineated?³²

Looking back later, Kamphuis wrote more critically about Holwerda's project, especially concerning his interpretation of Ephesians 1:4 (the word "eternal" can simply be explained by "elect before the foundation of the world") and Romans 9:11 ("the electing purpose of God"). Election is itself the structure of God's purpose. "In particular when we see in Scripture how God by his act of calling within time creates a division by election, it is, so to speak, obvious that this element of election is taught also

³⁰ G. C. Berkouwer, *De verkiezing Gods* (Kampen, 1955), 72 [ET: *Divine Election* (Studies in Dogmatics), translated by Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 68]. See the analysis of Barth and Berkouwer written in 1956 by J. Faber, "De dogmatische betekenis van de Dordtse leerregels," in *Er staat geschreven . . . Er is geschied. Jubileumbundel van de Bond van Mannenverenigingen op Gereformeerde Grondslag uitgegeven ter gelegenheid van het veertigjarig bestaan van de Bond* (n.p., 1986), 101-107.

³¹ L. Doekes, *Dordt tegen Barth. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar aan de Theologische Hogeschool van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland te Kampen op 6 maart 1953* (Terneuzen, n.d.), 6-8, 25. This speech, in which Doekes polemicized against Woelderink as well (19), is omitted from the study of H. J. C. J. Wilschut, *J. G. Woelderink. Om de 'vaste grond des geloofs'. De ontwikkeling in zijn theologisch denken, met name ten aanzien van verbond en verkiezing* (Heerenveen, 2000).

³² Wilschut, *Woelderink*, 405, mentions as evidence of a dogmatic-confessional cleavage "a line of thinking that presents itself as 'non-speculative,' one which moves away from the so-called scholastic character of scientific theology," which he illustrated by pointing to Visee's criticism of anthropomorphism.

in the pre-temporal element of God's decree ('before the foundation of the world,' Ephesians 1:4!).³³

Bremmer viewed the trilogy of Trimp, Wiskerke, and Kamphuis to be "an intensive probing and recasting of the traditional doctrine of election."³⁴ The new generation wanted to develop Reformed dogmatics in conversation with the dogmatics of Schilder and in the context of contemporary theology (Barth, Woelderink). Remarkably Schilder was also rather freely criticized at various points, while at the same time his students did seek to optimize the gains registered in his work.

Intramural discussion

In the early years after Holwerda's death, the subject of God's election was treated especially with an eye to the criticism of Dort that was being registered outside the Reformed Churches (Liberated). But soon enough lines were drawn from Holwerda's thinking that pointed to a parting of the ways within the Reformed Churches (Liberated). Especially Douwe Holwerda, who published the work of his deceased brother ten years his senior, continued developing the exegetical line. In 1955 he obtained his doctorate in Greek language and literature on the basis of a dissertation written in Latin, something unique during that time.³⁵ His book was dedicated in the first place to his deceased brother (*fratris piaae memoriae*). In making his contribution to the exegetical debate, Douwe Holwerda argued emphatically that he had written as a linguist: "The dogmatic-theological 'processing' of potential results of this exegetical study is something for a later time and for others to pursue." He wrote a series of articles in *De Reformatie* about "The foundation of the world,"³⁶ which received critical responses from various writers. D. Holwerda claimed that the expression "before the foundation of the world" referred

³³ Kamphuis, *Een eeuwig verbond*, 79-80 [ET: *An Everlasting Covenant*, 66; translation modified, NDK]. TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Kamphuis supplies a footnote at this point that is worth inserting here. "Besides, my own lecture notes give another explanation. It can be summarized as follows: election (as a historical act) that is *according* to the purpose. I can recall that as students we expressed our doubt on this point. This was possible in the open situation after the Liberation of the churches. In those same days, as I remember, some students had a talk with professor K. Schilder. The text from Romans 9 came up for discussion, as did Holwerda's interpretation. Both interpretations were considered without any tenacity, in spite of Schilder's clear exegetical conviction on this point, evident in his adoption of the classic Reformed interpretation, as we find it with Professor Greijdanus" (110; translation modified, NDK).

³⁴ See the extensive review of Kamphuis' *Katholieke vastheid* by Bremmer in *Petahja* 9 (1955): 93-104. In response to Kamphuis' criticism of K. Schilder's claim that in this dispensation no one can identify people who commit the sin against the Holy Spirit (K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche catechismus* [Goes, 1949], 2: 85), Bremmer wrote: "But we think that what was particularly valuable in this comment of Schilder was the point that in this dispensation God never reveals his definitive 'judgment of reprobation' upon humanity" (contra Kamphuis, *Katholieke vastheid*, 144-154).

³⁵ Douwe Holwerda, *Commentatio de vocis quae est ΦΥΣΙΣ vi atque usu praesertim in graecitate Aristotile anteriore* (Groningae, 1955).

³⁶ *De Reformatie* 30 (1954): 327, 335, 343-344, 348-349, 357; published as a collection in *Wat betekent de term 'Grondlegging der wereld' in het Nieuwe Testament?* (Enschede, 1958); included also in D. Holwerda, *De Schrift opent een vergezicht. Gebundelde bijdragen tot de exegese van het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen, 1998), 443-461. See also D. Holwerda, *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, 462-469.

to the beginning of the Jewish dispensation. Moreover, he understood the biblical expression “stands written in the book of life” to refer to the civil polity of Jerusalem-Israel. Thus, these expressions refer not to eternal election, but to historical phenomena. The subsequent discussion occurred on the basis of exegesis, also from his opponents. L. Doekes, for example, thought that the phrases referred nonetheless to the creation of the world.³⁷ In the first response article he reflected briefly on what B. Holwerda had written: “Later, however, it amazed me that the idea had already taken root among several readers on the basis of the articles of the late Professor Holwerda, namely, that it was commonly accepted that with the explanation of Ephesians 1 and of the doctrine of election taught by former generations we were on a completely mistaken path. I myself received the impression that the question had now become: Can the Canons of Dort still be maintained after all?”³⁸ In an extensive brochure Douwe Holwerda wrote his reply to Doekes.³⁹ This internal exegetical discussion appeared very vulnerable in the context of the external dogmatic developments. D. Holwerda felt he had been treated with contempt when Trimp mentioned him in the same breath with Woelderink.

Earlier, already in 1949, D. Holwerda had published a collection of study outlines of Romans for young people’s groups. In that collection, Holwerda had translated the familiar sentence in Romans 9:13, “Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated” as “upon Jacob I let my choice fall, Esau I passed by.” In his discussion he added the following instruction for leaders: “Remember that the question of Jacob and Esau is not about personal election from eternity, but about the election of a people at a particular historical moment for a special role in salvation history,” adding a reference to Malachi 1.⁴⁰ The redemptive-historical focus of B. Holwerda was taken further, while he was still living, by his brother Douwe and applied to the interpretation of Romans 9.

Among the Reformed Churches (Liberated) a new periodical was begun in 1957, alongside *De Reformatie*, entitled *Opbouw [Edification]*, published by Steenbergen in Zeist.⁴¹ The minister W. Borgdorff, who had studied under B. Holwerda during his entire theological training, wrote in

³⁷ L. Doekes, “Nieuw licht?” and “Het begin der wereld,” in *De Reformatie* 30 (1954): 370-371, 386.

³⁸ Doekes, “Nieuw licht,” 370.

³⁹ D. Holwerda, *De grondlegging der wereld – Zag Israël zijn uittocht als schepping? Twee studies* (Enschede, n.d.). In the *Gereformeerd Kerkblad voor Overijssel en Gelderland* 8 (1955), nos. 8-10, 12, and 14, J. Faber responded to the articles of D. Holwerda, and recalled the initial foray of B. Holwerda, which had been reprinted in *De Reformatie* in 1953. Kamphuis described the brochure in hindsight as “polemics with the gloves off” (Kamphuis, “Koers tussen de klippen door,” 173). H. Venema also rejected the view of D. Holwerda (see his *Uitverkiezen en uitverkiezing in het Nieuwe Testament* [Kampen, 1965], 56-57 and note 128).

⁴⁰ D. Holwerda, *O diepte des rijkdoms. Schetsen Schriftstudie op Romeinen* (Utrecht, 1949): 50-52. See also D. Holwerda, *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, 152-159. For a critique, see Wiskerke, *Geroepen volk*, 56 and 160, note 32.

⁴¹ See W. Bouwman, “De Reformatie en de ‘oorlogen des Heeren.’ De redactiewisseling binnen De Reformatie en het ontstaan van Opbouw,” in *Vuur en vlam. Aspecten van het vrijgemaakt-gereformeerde leven 1944-1967*, edited by R. Kuiper and W. Bouwman (Amsterdam, n.d.), 151-179.

Opbouw a series of articles on Romans 9, entitled “The mercies of God.”⁴² During a study course for confessing church members dealing with the Canons of Dort, he regularly fielded the question about how to understand Romans 9:13. In his articles, he wanted to provide a counterbalance to the notion of arbitrariness in God. “The doctrine of election becomes in this way a threat to the assurance and joy of faith.” Over against this, Borgdorff wanted to show how it is particularly Romans 9 that speaks of God’s mercy. Israel’s situation shows that God’s election is not a possession. “Or does it belong to the nature of election that an appeal is made to the people of the covenant: an appeal that demands an answer, the punishment for ignoring which is that the election is made void?”⁴³ Although he referred to the collection of study outlines written by D. Holwerda, he did not adopt the latter’s translation of Romans 9:13. He did interpret the “hating” of God exclusively as God’s reaction (in favor of Israel) to Edom’s pride. Following D. Holwerda,⁴⁴ Borgdorff understood the hardening of Pharaoh not as the revelation of reprobation. God’s radical judgment followed the sixth plague. “Pharaoh himself began to harden his heart, to close his ears to the Word of the Lord. Here we find nothing, therefore, of an arbitrary pre-determination, of which Egypt’s king would have been the victim.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless Pharaoh’s entire life was presented by Paul as the determination of God, because “God’s enemies can never place our God before surprises. Their acting, wherein they themselves are responsible, is nonetheless in a miraculous way taken up in the sovereign acting of God.” Thus the phrase “God has mercy upon whom he will” obtains more texture than the phrase “and he hardens whom he wills.” The latter applied only for anyone who opposes the merciful God. Nevertheless, this did not lead Borgdorff to criticize the Canons of Dort.

This antipathy against a fatalistic portrait of election is also evident in Borgdorff’s Bible studies on Ephesians 1 published in *Opbouw*. Such dislike extended as well to an aversion to dogmatic-theological distinctions. “At that time when I was busy cementing Reformed dogmatics in my mind, I needed to learn this by heart: the ground of election is God’s pleasure and the ground of reprobation is God’s pleasure.”⁴⁶ He emphasized the joyful tone with which Paul had written about God’s election—summarized as “unto a particular task.” “And for that very reason we may not say that our election signifies the rejection of all other people. For our service consists in this, that through us God desires to make his gospel come to all people” (without teaching a universal atonement).

Dr. H. J. Jager, who in 1948 became professor of New Testament at the Theological College (Broederweg), agreed in his interpretation of Romans 9 with the exegesis that B. Holwerda had offered in the context of

⁴² W. Borgdorff, “De ontfermingen Gods” I-XII, *Opbouw* 2 (1958): 292, 299-300, 315-316, 323, 331, 340, 347, 355, 364, 372, 381-382.

⁴³ Borgdorff, “De ontfermingen Gods,” 316.

⁴⁴ D. Holwerda, *Diepte des rijkdoms*, 53-54.

⁴⁵ Borgdorff, “De ontfermingen Gods,” 355.

⁴⁶ W. Borgdorff, “Een schat van onwaardeerbare prijs,” *Opbouw* 6 (1962): 145-146.

his treatment of Genesis 25.⁴⁷ “As soon as people hear that the word *eklogē* = election, they couple this with the notion of an eternal and individual election that leads ultimately to salvation.” But in Romans 9:11 Paul indicates that the electing purpose has been grounded in God. “It was not God’s people who called out for God, but God called his people. In his electing summons the LORD is free to reject and to choose, and in this context it must be said immediately that human responsibility is not neutralized for a moment.” In the person of Jager there was combined both a concentration on the biblical message and disinterest in dogmatic theology. In 1985 he wrote candidly that the Bible nowhere speaks of an eternal decree and certainly not of any pre-temporal rejection.⁴⁸

In 1965, H. Venema defended his doctoral dissertation at the Theological College, entitled *Uitverkiezen en uitverkiezing in het Nieuwe Testament* [“To Elect” and “Election” in the New Testament]. His advisor was Jager. Harm Venema was only a month younger than Benne Holwerda. Later he would write that he had learned much from Holwerda, “from high school on, I would say.”⁴⁹ They came to know each other at the Willem Lodewijk Gymnasium in Groningen and became fast friends. Venema enrolled at the Theological College in Kampen in 1930, two years after Benne Holwerda. Their study careers overlapped four years. The goal of his dissertation, wrote Venema, “at least for our part, is to fulfill the desire of the late professor B. Holwerda, who once when he was still a pastor pressed upon us that our dogmaticians and exegetes should take up this subject—he was thinking particularly of the relationship between covenant and election—in a shared study in order to make progress.”⁵⁰ Writing after Wiskerke’s study of the Old Testament, Venema was the exegete who wanted to describe the concepts of *εκλεγομαι*, *εκλεκτος*, and *εκλογη* in the New Testament. His conclusion was that God’s choosing referred to an act of God within time by virtue of the gracious working proceeding from Christ. This act lies anchored in the eternal redemptive will of God. Election entails selection. By receiving grace, some are rescued from the universal condition of lostness. That God passes others by is ascribed to their own guilt alone. Over against Wiskerke, Venema claimed that “not electing” and “rejecting” may not be equated.

Venema returned to the discussion between Bremmer and Trimp regarding the counsel of peace. The question was whether the “being chosen in Christ” of Ephesians 1:4 implied that God “simultaneously chose the mediator of reconciliation and the church in him” (L. van der Zanden). In this way, people were understanding “in Christ” to mean

⁴⁷ H. J. Jager, *Enige opmerkingen over Romeinen*. *College-dictaat* (Kampen, 1978), 184-186 (the first edition was published in 1962).

⁴⁸ H. J. Jager, “Raad’ [Een abc van het Nieuwe Testament],” *Opbouw* 29, no. 10 (1985).

⁴⁹ H. Venema, *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?* (Kampen, 1992), 107. See the “In memoriam” by Rev. M. de Vries in *Handboek 1995 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Goes, 1995), 331-333.

⁵⁰ H. Venema, *Uitverkiezen en uitverkiezing in het Nieuwe Testament*, 8. His first thesis for defense was related to the dogmatic-theological legacy of the Liberation: “Rejection of the doctrinal decisions adopted by the general synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the sessions of June 1942 in Utrecht with respect to the covenant of grace and self-examination, compel us to reflect about what Scripture says concerning God’s choosing.”

“with him.” Venema agreed with Trimp that this was incorrect, but just as firmly rejected (with Bremmer) Trimp’s view regarding the counsel of peace. “Here it is being candidly affirmed that the redemptive work of Christ involves merely the execution of God’s decree of election.”⁵¹ Venema himself understood the “in Christ” to be causal-instrumental: “God chooses *through* Christ, through the working, the power-filled working grace proceeding from Christ.”⁵² In discussing the expression “the counsel (βουλή) of God,” he wrote that this refers to “the salvation plan that God himself formed unto the deliverance of the world fallen in sin, unto the salvation of his church. He executes this salvation plan in Christ, and makes it known in Christ.” This occurs in such a way that God functions systematically as he directs the course of events.⁵³

Venema positioned himself within the dogmatic discussion by rejecting the *Richtlijnen voor de behandeling van de leer der uitverkiezing* [Guidelines for Using the Doctrine of Election] of the Reformed (Hervormde) Church.⁵⁴ He defended the Canons of Dort against criticism. At the same time he contended against every kind of determinism that shortchanged human responsibility. In Venema’s book, the homework that his contemporary and fellow student Holwerda had assigned, involving the exegesis of the New Testament, was done most consistently. We may say that it was quite remarkable that a dissertation like this one could have been defended at the Theological College during the tension-filled decade of the 1960s.⁵⁵

In 1992 when Venema recast his ideas in a more popular book, he drew attention in the first chapter once again to the work of Holwerda. “It would be regrettable if he were to be forgotten altogether and his work, especially what he has written about God’s election, were to be neglected.”⁵⁶ This time the Canons of Dort as such came under attack in his criticism of the “pre-temporal decree” of election. In Canons I.12 believers are counseled to seek within themselves the fruits of election. But then in their search for assurance, people are cast upon themselves, and the basis of God’s revelation is abandoned, according to Venema.⁵⁷ He spotted a tension in the Canons of Dort I.7 when it speaks on the one hand about God’s election from the human race “which had fallen

⁵¹ Venema, *Uitverkiezen en uiverkiezing*, 46-47, note 98. See also Venema, *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?*, 35-37.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁴ See also J. Kamphuis, *Verkenningen I. Kerk en uitverkiezing* (Goes, n.d. [1963]), 162-223.

⁵⁵ The reviews were extremely critical. C. van der Waal reviewed the book in *De Reformatie* 41 (1965): 29-30, 37-38. He wrote in a sketch of the contemporary theological climate: “It can be observed that also among our members many no longer feel happy about Dordt,” and he foresaw that this book could play a role “in the coming debates.” By concentrating on election-within-time “the possibility was created that implications would be drawn from his dissertation with which he himself would not agree.” Van der Waal also cited a review of Dr. C. S. van der Merwe in *Die Kerkblad* of the Reformed Churches in South Africa, in which the judgment of biblicism was leveled (37). The review by D. Holwerda (in *Opbouw* 9 (1965): 262ff.) was quite sharp in its criticism of the content as well.

⁵⁶ Venema, *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?*, 8. Against Kamphuis’ criticism, see 28 and 115; see also 107-108 and 154-155.

⁵⁷ Venema, *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?*, 31-32, 107.

through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction” (referring to completed action in the past, to historical reality), and on the other hand it speaks of election before the foundation of the world of a definite number of particular people.⁵⁸ “Clearly the notion must be abandoned that God already in eternity has fixed who will be elect and who will be reprobate and this without considering human acts of commission or omission.”⁵⁹ At the same time, Venema maintained that it is the eternal God who—within time—chooses his own out of free grace, and passes others by. In his dissertation he wrote concerning the expression “before the foundation of the world” in Ephesians 1:4, “that the ‘being chosen in Christ’ transcends all earthly measure.”⁶⁰ The professor of New Testament at the Theological University (Oudestraat) in Kampen, Dr. H. N. Ridderbos, had expressed criticism of that statement: *pro* is a temporal adverb meaning “before,” not a spatial preposition meaning “above.”⁶¹ Venema conceded this and interpreted Ephesians 1:4 as an expression about God “who is from before the foundation of the world, who is God from eternity to eternity, the God who is love always and forever.”⁶²

A conversation with H. Venema in the periodical *Koers* [*Course of Travel*] supplied wider notoriety for his book. In one review it was stated, with all due respect for the person of the author who at that point was an eighty-two year old minister: “He should not have written or published this book,” and the writer asked: “What now?”⁶³ The consistory of the Reformed Church in Roodeschool, where Dr. Venema was minister emeritus, announced with the consent of classis Warffum in a letter to the churches that it condemned his book at the point of his rejection of election from eternity, but would not pursue disciplinary measures against the minister because he was no longer engaged in official labor of any kind.⁶⁴ Although this second book was rejected because it conflicted with the Canons of Dort, his first book continued to be accepted within the context of freedom of exegesis among the Reformed Churches (Liberated).

A year after Venema received his doctor’s degree, J. Douma defended his dissertation on *Algemene genade* [*Common Grace*]. He offered an exegesis of Romans 9-11 and concluded point by point that these chapters are definitely talking about personal salvation and condemnation. “For within the context of this salvation history, God sends his salvation and condemnation, his mercy and hardening, very personally,” and surely with eternal effect. Divine predestination and human responsibility must

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18; cf. 146: “Of course, God comes up with his definite number of particular people.”

⁵⁹ Ibid., 113. See the reviews of T. S. Huttenga, “Wa[n]neer koos God?” I-II, *Gereformeerde Kerkbode*, 15 and 22 May 1992, 286-287, 302-304; W. G. de Vries, “Uitverkiezing, hoe en wanneer?” *De Reformatie* 67 (1991): 625-629.

⁶⁰ Venema, *Uitverkiezen en uitverkiezing*, 57.

⁶¹ H. Ridderbos, *Paulus. Ontwerp van zijn theologie* (Kampen, 1966), 387, note 55 [ET: *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, translated by John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 347, note 46.

⁶² Venema, *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?*, 123.

⁶³ De Vries, “Uitverkiezing, hoe en wanneer?” 629.

⁶⁴ *De Reformatie* 68 (1992): 934.

be confessed together. Moreover, the remnant-idea shows that the “all Israel” that will be saved is defined personally. Douma took as his starting point the commentary of Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen* (1959) [Romans], and observed, without specific discussion and rebuttal, that he also differed with exegetes such as B. Holwerda, D. Holwerda, and H. Venema at more than one point.⁶⁵ At the same time he emphasized that when the decree is discussed in the Canons of Dort, it is taught that reprobation is not *eodem modo* (in the same manner) the cause of unbelief and godlessness as election is the source of faith and good works. Douma criticized Schilder and Kamphuis who spoke of God’s eternal hatred alongside his eternal love.⁶⁶ At the same time, Douma held firmly that the deepest ground of reprobation lies also in God’s pleasure. “The fact that the reprobate are *reprobate* is never apart from consideration of their sin and guilt; that *they* are reprobate (and not the others as well) rests exclusively in God’s pleasure.”⁶⁷ The connection between Douma’s topic and election is that God’s counsel not only involves people, but includes all things that God in Christ has reconciled to himself.

Provisional assessment

A. L. Th. de Bruijne, currently professor at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), provided an overview of the theological developments in the Reformed Churches since the Liberation, and noted with regard to the doctrine of election that amid criticism of Dort during the 1950s, both the Liberated doctrine of the covenant and the Dort doctrine of election continued to be maintained. He mentioned four new accents. People became more aware of the difference between biblical language usage and dogmatic-theological terms. People chose more emphatically for an historical point of entrance in speaking about God’s eternal election. The truth that election occurs “in Christ” received more attention. Finally, an excessively strong parallel between election and reprobation was rejected.⁶⁸ This overview was indeed accurate, but concealed the fact that already since the 1950s areas of tension were delineated within the Liberated churches that led to the split at the end of the 1960s. One of those areas of tension was the doctrine of election and reprobation.

In an address delivered in 1985 to the Theological College student body *Fides Quadrat Intellectum*, J. Kamphuis, who was at the time the dogmatics professor, reviewed this discussion concerning the relationship between election and covenant. He observed that the Confession as

⁶⁵ J. Douma, *Algemene genade. Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuiper, K. Schilder en Joh. Calvijn over ‘algemene genade’*, 3rd edition (Goes, 1976), 289-295. He referred to B. Holwerda, *Dictaten Historia Revelationis*, 1:26-37; D. Holwerda, *Diepte des rijkdoms*, 47-66; and H. Venema, *Uitverkiezen en uitverkiezing*, 105-125, 136-137.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 295-302.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 295, with reference to the Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors I.8.

⁶⁸ A. L. Th. de Bruijne, “Een reis met uitzicht. Impressie van de theologische ontwikkeling sinds de Vrijmaking,” in *1944 en vervolgens. Tien maal over vijftig jaar Vrijmaking*, edited by G. Harinck and M. te Velde (Barneveld, 1994), 63.

such had not come under discussion, but that “any exegetical foundation undergirding it was stripped away or denied.”⁶⁹ The opposition against election from eternity was, said Kamphuis, no legitimate consequence of the Liberation, but much more “an accommodation to the *current* theological climate marked by an *historicizing* of God’s election together with a universalistic tendency.”⁷⁰ That is how he saw things as he looked back, explaining that all of this came to the surface in a variety of events during that time.

That the Canons of Dort were not directly at issue appears also from the book *Geroepen volk* [A People Called], with which Wiskerke completed his trilogy. His work *Léven tussen sterven en opstanding* [Living Between Death and Resurrection] documented the decision that the Liberated particular synod of the southern provinces adopted in 1962-63 against Rev. B. Telder’s book *Sterven . . . en dan? Gaan Gods kinderen, wanneer zij sterven, naar de hemel?* [Die . . . and then what? When They Die, Do God’s Children Go To Heaven?]. While Wiskerke stood firmly amid the struggle to maintain the integrity of the Confession, his book *Geroepen volk* of 1967 was an informal exegetical study. His criticism of Schilder’s claim concerning eternal hatred in God was frank and more detailed than that of Douma. “With divine intensity God reacts in his wrath, for he is genuinely provoked by sin. We may not ‘rescue’ his sovereignty by denying him this living action, or by eternalizing his hatred that rages throughout history.”⁷¹ His criticism of Holwerda was also casual and more direct: “Within this climate of a certain prejudice for election-as-act-within-history Holwerda arrived at the point of cutting ‘election’ in Romans 9:11 off from the ‘purpose’ and attaching it to the historical act of divine calling.”⁷² Venema’s dissertation was treated positively. Wiskerke, too, interpreted Genesis 25, Malachi 1, and Romans 9 consistently in a redemptive-historical manner. What was involved first was God’s electing and rejecting actions toward nations within time. “God’s plan, sovereign also in the decision unto grace and condemnation, is not realized particularly with respect to Esau apart from Esau’s specific covenant breaking conduct.”⁷³ He underscored this in order to delineate the unique responsibility and guilt of Esau. At the same time, Wiskerke fully maintained the validity of the doctrine of election and reprobation—which he saw in the word “purpose”—while seldom referring to the Canons of Dort. In the work of Wiskerke, then, the unfinished homework assignment of Holwerda was completed and optimized.

To what extent was the dogmatic-theological legacy of Schilder at issue in the debate about election since the 1950s? In his 1934 address commemorating the centennial of the Separation (Afscheiding), he had emphasized the importance of the *canones* of Dort not only for the doctrine of predestination but also for the entirety of dogmatics. “And thus it remains to be concluded that the Separation envisioned no other in-

⁶⁹ Kamphuis, “Koers tussen de klippen door,” 162-164.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷¹ Wiskerke, *Geroepen volk*, 90-92.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 57, 63, and 150, note 31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 43.

tended dogmatic significance than a return, on the grounds of God's truth and of sober realism, to Dordrecht. Because Dordrecht had dealt with five particular points? No—because it was the last synod that dealt with doctrinal deliverances and confessional formulation.⁷⁴ For Schilder and for his students the Canons of Dort were of preeminent importance for the development of doctrine and for the church's own confessing activity.

He himself had developed no *locus de praedestinatione*, but in his work Schilder had stimulated his students with various inspiring ideas. Schilder's vision of history was that the transcendent God had entered into the history he had created. Schilder wanted to do full justice to human responsibility. Above God's works he saw the counsel of God, the *decretum Dei* or *pactum salutis*, which the persons of the holy trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—had decided. Schilder rejected the notion of a logical order within the decrees of God, because this notion shortchanged God's wisdom. Moreover, the Latin words *pactum* and *decretum* are perfect tense participles, whereas this verb tense does not apply to God, who is eternal and living. This led him to the concise formulation that “the decrees of God are the decreeing God himself.”⁷⁵ Schilder's definition of God's eternity, borrowed from Boëthius, is: “God's eternity is his *perfect and always entire possession of interminable life* (interminabilis vitae tota simul ac perfecta pos[s]essio).”⁷⁶

Within Schilder's theology lay numerous impulses spurring his students to think through again the doctrine of election and reprobation. Holwerda's project probed especially the reality of salvation history. On the basis of their intimate acquaintance with the work of their teachers, the students of Schilder and Holwerda have made progress in their labor. Just as Holwerda's work remained incomplete, so too Schilder left behind no comprehensive dogmatics, except for his monograph *Wat is de hemel?* [*What Is Heaven?*]. For his immediate students, however, they were able to lay hold of his suggestive impulses, and they did that, albeit partially.

After the split

Following the ecclesiastical crisis of the 1960s, it was quiet for a little while with respect to the doctrine of election. Among the Liberated folk, several popular studies and other books dealing with the Canons of Dort appeared.⁷⁷ In this way, this Confession was kept alive within the consciousness of the churches. There was absolutely no criticism of the

⁷⁴ K. Schilder, *De dogmatische betekenis der 'Afscheiding' ook voor onzen tijd* (1934), in *Verzamelde werken*, Part III, *De kerk*, edited by J. Kamphuis (Goes, 1962), 2:18.

⁷⁵ K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche catechismus* (Goes, 1947), 1:385.

⁷⁶ K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche catechismus* (Goes, 1950), 3:116. Cf. H. M. Yoo, *Raad en daad. Infra- en supralapsarisme in de Nederlandse gereformeerde theologie van de 19^e en 20^e eeuw* (Kampen, 1990), 136-170.

⁷⁷ M. Janssens, *Schetsenbundel Dordtse leerregels en eredienst*. Publication of the Organization of Reformed Women's Societies, 5-30; J. Faber, H. J. Meijerink, C. Trimp, G. Zomer, *De schat van Christus' bruid* (Goes, 1972); E. Koop, *De Dordtse leerregels dichterbij gebracht* (Kampen, 1983); M. H. Sliggers, *Geloven en belijden* (Barneveld, 1986), 3:9-59. In 1957 the collection of studies entitled *Tot prijs Zijner heerlijkheid* appeared (publication of the Organization of Young Women's Societies), which was reprinted in 1963.

Canons among the Liberated, but there was no development of theological thinking concerning this doctrine either. Although in the crisis of the 1960s criticism of the Canons of Dort was not central, among the later Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK) room to depart from the language and the doctrinal categories of the Confession was indeed granted to leaders who had come to differing conclusions on various points. This led in turn to further reflection on the doctrine of election, but did not lead to any separation from Dort.

At several moments it did seem that a separation from Dort was looming. In 1983 Rev. W. G. Rietkerk wrote about the doctrine of double predestination: "We may consider ourselves fortunate indeed that today this is rarely taught any more. It is an unbiblical doctrine which teaches that before creation God supposedly condemned for eternity a portion of the future human race."⁷⁸ He referred to the work of Venema and Ridderbos, and wrote: "There is but one election, namely, unto life," without wanting to fall into universalism. Following criticism, also in the context of ecclesiastical conversations with the Christian Reformed Churches (CGK), Rietkerk removed these passages from the discussion.

During the 1980s, after a long period of silence, the doctrine of election was put at the center of interest by professor Dr. C. Graafland. He described the origin and development of that doctrine within Reformed Protestantism from the time of John Calvin to the period following Karl Barth.⁷⁹ Graafland's criticism of Calvin and of the Canons of Dort was that one finds in them "a pessimistic view of the church (the congregation), which is fueled by a doctrine of election that is strongly particularistic."⁸⁰ The place of Christ in Calvin's definition of God's decree of election was not sufficiently central.⁸¹ Moreover, Calvin's doctrine of election was supposedly drawn inadequately from the Old Testament, was formed mostly by polemics, and was isolated from preaching. In his retirement, J. Kamphuis responded critically to these points.⁸² In an address delivered to the Organization of Men's Societies in 1984, Kamphuis showed and underscored the salvation historical interest of the Canons of Dort I.1-6 by explaining the historical origins of their writing.⁸³ Graafland's criticism of the classic doctrine of election seemed to have been nurtured within a fatalistic climate like that found in the experiential tradition. Kamphuis showed that election received ample attention in Calvin's preaching. He also pointed out an error in the translation of the Canons of Dort I.7. The Dankbaar edition used widely in the Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk), read: ". . . chosen . . . to redemption in Christ," from

⁷⁸ W. G. Rietkerk, "Pluralisme en 'klassiek gereformeerd,'" *Opbouw* 27, no. 39 (1983): 2-3.

⁷⁹ C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth. Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het gereformeerd protestantisme* (Zoetermeer, 1987).

⁸⁰ Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth*, 19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸² J. Kamphuis, *Met Calvijn in de impasse? Betekent de gereformeerde leer van de uitverkiezing en evangelieprediking een blokkade voor de prediking van het evangelie?* (Ermelo, 1989).

⁸³ J. Kamphuis, "De inzet van de Dordtse leerregels," in *Er staat geschreven . . . Er is geschied*, 293-300.

which the suggestion arises that the decree of election does not have Christ at its center, but merely involves election “to redemption in Christ.” Kamphuis showed that the original Dutch text itself reads “has chosen in Christ” (*uytvercoren heeft in Christo*), whereas earlier it read, “unto redemption, out of sheer grace” (*tot de salicheyt, uyt louter ghenade*). Election as it was mentioned in Canons I.6 is in this way—as being in Christ—developed in Canons I.7.⁸⁴

Worthy of mention is the 1990 monograph *UITgekozen! [Chosen OUT!]* written for young people by the current professor of Old Testament at the Theological University (Broederweg), Dr. G. Kwakkel. In this work the author mentioned especially the publications of Kamphuis, Trimp, and Wiskerke. Kwakkel provided no explanation of the Canons of Dort, but discussed five Scripture passages. He, too, allowed the dynamic of biblical expression to come to the fore, so that the emphasis came to rest on being chosen unto redemption in Christ. It is striking that in his explanation of Romans 9, he omitted any discussion of the sharpness of God’s “hatred” of Esau. In connection with the person of Pharaoh, Kwakkel contested the view that Pharaoh’s self-hardening preceded God’s action, for “the LORD had already decided and communicated that he would do that before there was any mention whatsoever of hardening in connection with Pharaoh.”⁸⁵ Scripture interpretation and loyalty toward the Canons of Dort went together.

Later students

In the final years of Holwerda’s brief professorate, he was able to influence two other students who in subsequent years gave expression to their thinking about election in Scripture and in the Confession. Drs. H. de Jong and Drs. H. Smit (1930-2001) were second-year students when Holwerda passed away. Both became teachers for the Theological Study Institute of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK), the former in Old Testament exegesis and the latter in dogmatics. Henk Smit formulated his ideas in a 1988 address entitled “De Dordtse leerregels . . . vandaag” [“The Canons of Dort . . . today”].⁸⁶ Although he did not mention Holwerda, he appropriated his emphasis on “the Lord’s particular speaking within time.” From that starting point he criticized what he called “a distance-defining manner” of formulation in the Canons of Dort,

⁸⁴ Kamphuis, *Met Calvijn in de impasse?*, 51-52. He pointed out that in the translation found in the *Gereformeerd kerkboek* of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), the first clause of I.7 reads “. . . has chosen a definite number of particular people in Christ unto redemption,” whereas the original intermediate sentence is included as a new sentence, whereby the “chosen in Christ” is repeated once more (although that did not occur in the original text).

⁸⁵ G. Kwakkel, *UITgekozen! De bijbel over vragen rond de uitverkiezing* (Barneveld, 1990), 71.

⁸⁶ In *Begeleidend schrijven. 25 Jaar Theologische Studie Begeleiding*, edited by J. Bouma et al. (Amsterdam, 1994), 136-151. I wrote a review of Smit’s contributions to this collection, which appeared in articles entitled “Dordtse leerregels . . . vandaag,” “Dordtse leerregels onder kritiek?,” and “Dordtse leerregels in gebruik,” in *De Reformatie* 71 (1996): 493-495, 511-514, 529-531, articles later collected in *Opdat zij allen een zijn*, edited by J. W. Maris et al. (Barneveld, 1997), 61-82. See also the comments of A. N. Hendriks in *Nader Bekeken* 1 (1994): 245-246.

“whereby texts were adduced as proofs, texts that belong to a very particular context of comfort and warning.” Smit expressed the same sensitivity about the injury resulting from a deterministic use of the Canons of Dort that had appeared during the 1960s. So he spoke of “genetic depressive factors” in the doctrine.⁸⁷ He thought that the Canons are too difficult and complicated to function in their entirety as expression of the faith of Christ’s church.

It was especially Henk de Jong who returned to the work of Holwerda. Whereas in 1992 Venema had written that there had been too little response to Holwerda’s discussions of the relationship between covenant and election, De Jong disagreed. He portrayed the history of the reception of Holwerda’s ideas during the 1950s and 1960s this way: “There were responses, in my estimation, though Holwerda’s name might not have been mentioned. Some people thought that with his approach the Reformed Confession was threatened. It was Wiskerke who (along with others such as Kamphuis and Trimp) with his book about election, as it were, picked up the glove in defense of the classic Confession.”⁸⁸ In addition he pointed out: “I used the phrase ‘as it were,’ for as we have said, he [that is: Wiskerke] did not openly contradict Holwerda’s sentiments, presumably to avoid adding fuel to the partisan conflict underway in the newly begun Liberated churches.” De Jong’s personal recollection seems to have colored this reminiscence. During the 1950s Holwerda’s name was indeed mentioned with care, whereas in the 1960s more distancing occurred and criticism was expressed openly. At the same time it may be said that Holwerda had asked exegetes and dogmatists to make progress together. Whereas Holwerda showed no inclination for a critical investigation of the Confession, the altered theological climate of the 1950s forced a defense of the classic Confession. This occurred both in loyal adherence to the Confession and in attempts at dogmatic theological originality.

De Jong noted that Wiskerke connected election from eternity and election in history by means of distinguishing between a first and a second election. The remnant-idea from the Old Testament formed the second election and brought about the election from eternity. De Jong wanted to pick up this line, because “if you want to do justice to all the data in Scripture, in your reflection about election you cannot omit the doctrine of the eternal definitive preordination.” This latter had occurred with others like D. Holwerda and Venema. De Jong wanted to make progress in the trajectory of B. Holwerda and Wiskerke, but connected the second election not with the “remnant,” but with Christ, “the Elect One *par excellence*.”⁸⁹ He saw the lines of both covenant and election converging in the Old Testament, the first in David-Zion, and (both the line of persons as well as the line of places) then in Christ. The exciting thing about De Jong’s work is that exegesis and doctrine go hand in hand. He

⁸⁷ See also H. Smit, “Gereformeerde leer en depressiviteit,” in *Begeleidend schrijven*, 152-161.

⁸⁸ H. de Jong, *Van oud naar nieuw. De on|t|wikk|elingsgang van het Oude naar het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen, 2002), 167.

⁸⁹ De Jong, *Van oud naar nieuw*, 170.

worked out in a new way the ancient distinction between twofold election and twofold covenant. There is the covenant of Sinai with conditional promises, and there is the unconditional Davidic covenant. It is this way also with election: the Christ-election is the critical center of the national election. In him election must be made sure. In faith a person receives a share in the eternal-definitive election of Christ. In this way room was made for doing justice to human responsibility. In Paul, according to De Jong, calling and election are synonymous concepts, differing only in nuance. “We can therefore say with proper carefulness that ‘calling’ in distinction from ‘election’ emphasizes the responsibility that comes with election, whereas ‘election’ is more relationship-establishing than ‘calling,’ and includes additionally the emotional element that comes with the established relationship.”⁹⁰ Also valuable was that this “being elect in Christ” both was anchored in God’s counsel (De Jong terms this the eternal-definitive) and came to manifestation in salvation history.

In his confrontation with the Canons of Dort, De Jong made some critical observations.⁹¹ We read in Canons of Dort I.7: “[God] did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation.” De Jong stumbled at the word “also,” because this suggests that the decision of election and reprobation came before the appointment of Christ. De Jong also surrendered the idea that it can be said of individuals that they are elect (or reprobated) in the eternal-definitive sense. The eternal-definitive election applies only to Christ. It applies to us only through faith in Christ. If God does not give people faith, this can end in reprobation in an eternal-definitive sense. But this then is a reprobation due to unbelief. The number of the elect is not fixed, but open. The core of his criticism of the Canons was whether the secret of faith and unbelief, of the “giving and not giving” (Matt. 13:11), is being explained too much from the point of view of the eternal decree, instead of leaving it with God as his secret.⁹²

In 2002, De Jong’s successor in the Study Institute, Dr. Ad van der Dussen, published *De omgekeerde wereld* [*The Upside-Down World*]. In this booklet he sought to bring the doctrine of election closer to the modern person living in a democratized culture which associates election with human freedom, such that the burden now becomes “having to choose for God.” Already in the preface he openly commented: “As a minister among the Netherlands Reformed Churches [NGK] I agree with the Confession.”⁹³ From Scripture he brought God’s speaking about his choice close to the modern person. When he concluded each chapter with a set of “theological links” that included notes critical of the Canons of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 182.

⁹¹ Ibid., 321-339.

⁹² For a broader discussion, see E. A. de Boer, “Schriftgeleerd,” “Schriftstudie over de verkiezing,” and “Vragen aan drs. H. de Jong,” together with his response, “Antwoord aan dr. E. A. de Boer,” in *De Reformatie* 78 (2002): 439-442, 462-464, 485-487, 507-511. See also the interview of W. Smouter with H. de Jong in *Opbouw* 47, no. 22 (2003): 9-10.

⁹³ Ad van der Dussen, *De omgekeerde wereld. Over de strekking van de bijbelse verkondiging van Gods verkiezing* (Amsterdam, 2002), 8; for his cursory interpretation of Romans 9-11, see 37-65.

Dort, he formulated them carefully. Thus he mentioned briefly that the quotes of Romans 9-11 in the Canons do not take into account Paul's specific discussion, and that the place of Israel does not get any space within the classic doctrine of election.⁹⁴ He also claimed, with cautious criticism of the Canons of Dort I.7, that we cannot say "that Christ as it were only later 'went along' and only at that point was linked to God's already established election decisions."⁹⁵ Finally, he also placed himself in opposition to the double decree of election and reprobation⁹⁶—a sentiment that in the second half of the twentieth century had become virtually classic.

Nevertheless this did not at all mean for Van der Dussen that he refused to acknowledge divine rejection and hardening. He rendered the doctrine of election in the light of divine freedom. Concerning the meaning of the phrase "God hardens whom he wills," Van der Dussen wrote: "Paul refers to this in order to undergird his claim that even God's *rejection* of people has no connection with their manner of life."⁹⁷ *De omgekeerde wereld* confronts us with the freedom of God who does not make himself dependent on people and their efforts, but who sets people free by calling them to faith. Van der Dussen can no longer be called a student of Holwerda. Independently from one another, both he and De Jong provided a new synthesis of exegesis and dogmatics in the doctrine of election, in sympathetic-critical reflection on the Confession. The question remains concerning the extent to which Dort provides the churches with theologically dated canons, or with a precious Confession still needed in order to assess the influence of evangelicalism.

After the crisis of the 1960s, the doctrine of election received attention within Liberated circles almost exclusively through historical studies produced by students of Holwerda's students. The outer limit of Holwerda's focused project was now clearly reached. Enough time has passed now so that Holwerda's project can either remain unmentioned or be mentioned only briefly by theologians. Under the guidance of J. Kamphuis, the Korean student H. M. Yoo received his doctorate with the dissertation entitled *Raad en daad* [*Counsel and Deed*], an analysis of the infra- and supralapsarian debate among nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians such as Berkouwer and Schilder.⁹⁸ In 2000, H. J. C. C. J. Wilschut defended his dissertation dealing with Woelderink, which described as well the contribution to the debate that had been made by Bremmer and Trimp.⁹⁹ Wilschut mentions the role of Holwerda merely in a footnote when he was describing the theological climate in which Woelderink was doing theology. He provided this brief portrait: "This influence of historicizing thinking is to be found in Reformed church circles with someone like B. Holwerda." For, "Holwerda emphasized God's election as a concrete-historical deed." "Holwerda did indeed maintain that

⁹⁴ Van der Dussen, *Omgekeerde wereld*, 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70, 73.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 82.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47; cf. 50-51, 65 (question 2), 78-79.

⁹⁸ Yoo, *Raad en daad*.

⁹⁹ Wilschut, *Woelderink*, 481-488 (Bremmer), 495-507 (Trimp).

the background of all of God's works is his eternal decree."¹⁰⁰ Whereas in the Netherlands Reformed (NGK) circles—with more critical distancing from a number of emphases in the Canons—room was found for doing original dogmatic theology with respect to the doctrine of divine election, among theologians in the circle of the Reformed Churches (Liberated)—with their more generous acceptance of the Canons as Confession—the renewal of dogmatic theology has not occurred. In the encounter between the two church denominations, both of which share the legacy of the Liberation, there has been conversation and rapprochement concerning the work of Smit and De Jong among the Liberated deputies for ecclesiastical unity and the Netherlands Reformed (NGK) committee for contact.

Agenda

In 2003, Dr. B. Kamphuis, professor of dogmatics at the Theological University (Broederweg) in Kampen, observed that since the Canons of Dort bear the marks of the concrete situation of the early seventeenth century, they cannot be the church's last word about divine election. For back then the discussion about the relationship between covenant and election still had to occur.¹⁰¹ The doctrine of the covenant had not been formulated all that strongly in the Confessions, though the doctrine of election indeed had been (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21; Belgic Confession, Art. 16; Canons of Dort, I and V). Reviewing the fifty years that have passed since the death of B. Holwerda, we may conclude that in large measure his desire for the cooperation of exegetes and dogmatists in the conversation about covenant and election has been met. The 1950s and 1960s saw the tension that could arise with respect to the church's Confession. The profit derived from that half-century during which Holwerda's unfinished homework assignment could be undertaken is that salvation history received maximum breathing space. From a doctrinal point of view it is clear that Holwerda had done nothing more than shift the accent of the questions, from the term "election" to terms like "purpose" and "counsel" of God. The tension between the "eternal-definitive" (De Jong) in God and human responsibility has continued.

It is striking that Holwerda's homework assignment and the exegetical and doctrinal working out of that assignment during the subsequent fifty years have hardly affected the Christian Reformed Churches (CGK).¹⁰² This also illustrates the fact that this theme, together with its discussion, belonged to the legacy of the Liberation. The spirituality of the Christian Reformed (CGK) people was formed more strongly by the Further Reformation (Nadere Reformatie) and by the place of covenant and election in preaching and piety. The discussions between these churches and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) and the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK) are being determined by

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 635, note 140.

¹⁰¹ B. Kamphuis, "Belijdenis en uitverkiezing," *De Reformatie* 78 (2002): 601-605.

¹⁰² See Van Genderen, *Verbond en verkiezing* (ET: *Covenant and Election*), and T. Brien, *Gods ontferming in tijd en eeuwigheid* (Kampen, 1993), where Trimp's confrontation with Woelderink is mentioned only a few times.

these topics. Only on the basis of the Canons of Dort as the church's living confession will people be able to find each other. Both the particular histories and the ecclesiastical interfacing determine the theological agenda. For that agenda we conclude by observing the following points.

1. The influence of the evangelical and charismatic movement places one-sided emphasis on the love, grace, and goodness of God in Jesus. Central to human identity are the believer's activity and openness to the Spirit. The desire to share the gospel with one's neighbor easily leads to an offer of the gospel which the person is free to accept or refuse. Wherever an undercurrent of this popular theology is present in Reformed churches, the theology of Dort will find very little echo. God's sovereignty, our lostness before the holy God, the depth of Christ's sacrifice, and the overpowering choice of God—all these constitute the counter balance. Attention to regeneration as a divine miracle can deepen the stress on personal conversion and concourse with God.

2. The *canones* require interpretation. Historical-theological acquaintance with the dogmatics and philosophy of the seventeenth century is needed to do justice to the arrangement and formulations of the Canons. In that respect we are compelled to furnish new studies. The students of Schilder and Holwerda were more at home in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than our generation is. Much of the criticism of the Canons of Dort in fact proceeds from the dogmatic-theological domination of the doctrine of election from a later time, and touches more on the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (reception history, the technique of analyzing the history of a text's influences and effects) than on the Confession itself. B. Kamphuis, for example, claimed that it is a rather uncharitable reading that understands the decree of election in the Canons of Dort I.6 apart from the further description of it being "in Christ" stipulated in I.7.¹⁰³ The oft-heard criticism of the phrase appearing in the same article of the Canons, "a definite number of particular people," understood as *numerus clausus* (a fixed number), places too much emphasis on the logical consequences of election and reprobation. For in the article dealing with reprobation, this element is not repeated.

3. An important distinction between election and covenant was mentioned by J. van Genderen. Christ is Surety and Mediator of the covenant. His blood and intercession must reconcile us with God. But Christ is not Head of the covenant.¹⁰⁴ He is—in Paul's words—head above all that is given to the church, which is his body (Eph. 1:22). In the church Christ brings together all who are saved, but not every member of the church is a living member of Christ. Christ is indeed Mediator and Head of all the elect (Canons of Dort I.7). This distinction between Christ as Head of our election and as Mediator of the covenant can protect us from the danger of covenant automatism.

4. Finally, fresh reflection on the doctrine of reprobation is needed. What is the function of this piece of doctrine?¹⁰⁵ In the dogmatic-

¹⁰³ Brienens, *Gods ontferming*, 603-604.

¹⁰⁴ Van Genderen, *Election and Covenant*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Brienens argued that in Scripture, reprobation always follows a person's (continuing in) sin, whereas election always precedes faith. He reduces reprobation from an eternal decree

theological thinking of the seventeenth century, reprobation seemed to be the logical complement of election. But it is more, since it is also an explanation of God's passing by of many other nations when he chose Israel. Even someone who thinks that the number of the elect is in principle still open (De Jong) still takes into account the fact that God does not send the gospel to some nations or bestow faith in some persons (Van der Dussen). In the Canons of Dort, reprobation is then defined also to mean "not elect," "being passed by," "left in the common misery of the human race." This demonstrates that election and reprobation are not *eodem modo*, not to be conceived of as functioning in the same way.

At the conference in The Hague in 1611, the Remonstrants tried time and again to drive the contra-Remonstrants to the logical conclusion that if faith is not the source but the fruit of election, then unbelief must be called the fruit of reprobation.¹⁰⁶ The contra-Remonstrants refused to draw this conclusion. And it is on this point that the "decision" of Dort most starkly rejects the twisting of the teaching of Dort, when people use the *eodem modo* to explain that "reprobation is in the same manner the cause of unbelief and godlessness as election is the source of faith and good works." When the decree of election and reprobation is discussed in the Canons (I.6), it is not in the spirit of Dort to view this as the *gemina praedestinatio*, but as the unity of God's counsel. Both the placement of election at the beginning of the Canons (I.7-14), and the differing formulation of reprobation (I.15), exclude any symmetry.¹⁰⁷ Reprobation is mentioned in only two of the fifty-nine articles of the *canones*.

The function of the doctrine of reprobation is (1) to delineate the undeservedness of the grace involved in the election of sinners; (2) to acknowledge God's righteousness in judging sin and unbelief; and (3) to tremble before the God who is the judge and avenger of evil. It is particularly in response to the evil that people do to one another (violence, injustice, sexual and spiritual abuse) that the gospel can be the good news that God will arise as judge and avenger for his children. He will execute justice, even when earthly justice falls short. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19). Rest is what a person finds in the gospel of Christ, in having been given by the Father to the Son.

about unbelievers to an eternal judgment upon unbelief. "A person rejects God's mercy in Christ and makes himself eternally worthy of reprobation. God's reprobation is his holy answer, his holy response to the hardening of a person in rejecting God's love toward him in Christ, a response that lies eternally fixed in God's counsel of decree, which is that whoever rejects his Son is irrevocably rejected" (*Gods ontferming*, 68; cf. 102).

¹⁰⁶ A. D. R. Polman, "De leer der verwerping van eeuwigheid op de Haagse conferentie van 1611," in *Ex auditu verbi. Theologische opstellen aangeboden aan prof. Dr. G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen, 1965), 186-189.

¹⁰⁷ Polman was arguing as well against several contra-Remonstrants and not against the Canons when he wrote: "The essential asymmetry between election and reprobation can no longer be made transparent with the doctrine of *praedestinatio gemina*" (Polman, "De leer der verwerping," 189). When he concluded that the Bible knows only of "a reprobation within history," that claim rested not on his historical material, but on the Scripture studies of the 1960s (*Ibid.*, 190). Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, "Vragen rondom de belijdenis," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 63 (1963): 1-41.

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Translator's Epilogue

WE CONCLUDE WITH SEVERAL OBSERVATIONS designed to serve as theological reflection rather than editorial commentary.

One helpful contribution from De Boer's essay is his explanation of B. Holwerda's desire to distinguish and clarify three kinds of terminology or semantic domains, namely, biblical, confessional, and theological terminology. These semantic domains are interrelated and overlapping, of course, but each serves purposes unique to its task. Biblical language is the church's mother tongue, her native speech, her Spirit-given vocabulary. Confessional language assists the church by drawing upon the language of Scripture to summarize and integrate its teaching with the assistance of theological formulations. Similarly, theological language ought to assist the church by systematizing and synthesizing the language of both Scripture and the Confessions.

Choosing among these kinds of speech, or isolating any one of them from the others, injures the unity and catholicity of the church. Preferring one over the others renders the church vulnerable and immature. Unless the church continues speaking the language of Scripture, in worship and witness, in catechesis and shepherding, she will slide into confessionalism and doctrinalism. Without continuing to use her confessional language, however, the church will surrender to a "just the Bible" mentality that exposes her to successive, and often successful, fads that select favorite notions, which, severed from the whole, become the soil for error and sectarianism. With regard to the church's theological language, two dangers exist, equally destructive. On the one hand, refusing to appreciate and learn the church's theological vocabulary and language will cut the church off from essential conversations, both historical and ecumenical. On the other hand, preferring the church's theological language as a substitute for, or a master over, her biblical and confessional language will inevitably result in a kind of orthodoxy bereft of life and pastorality—a phenomenon that has led one Reformed theologian (K. J. Popma) to complain that this is how theology kills the church.

There is great benefit, therefore, in cultivating, in honoring, and in defending this full-blown ecclesiastical trilingualism.

A second observation relates to the arduous labor of principled ecumenism. De Boer presents a slice of the painful history of Reformed church life in the Netherlands where theological debates repeatedly yielded ecclesiastical divisions. His narrative offers a remarkably peaceable approach, retrospectively as well as prospectively, toward healing those wounds. Honest assessment of the past, modest correction of predecessors, charitable readings of others—all of these components emerge within his analysis as elements essential to further ecumenical dialogue among brothers and sisters. Yet, the struggle to maintain both Scripture and confession as essentially harmonious means that more work, continuing work, needs to be done. But it must be done *bona fide*,

in good faith, the kind that is educable and mutually submissive. It must also be done *officiosa fide*, in dutiful faith, a faith bound by oaths of allegiance and subscription.

Finally, from De Boer's piece one learns how mistaken it would be either to reprimand or to fossilize the work of B. Holwerda, ignoring the subsequent criticisms and modifications provided by his own theological disciples. In addition, one cannot miss—but one must learn from—their chagrin bordering on embarrassment when Holwerda's seminal-but-undeveloped ideas became, within a different climate and context, the basis for appealing against the Canons of Dort in favor of the Bible. To champion Holwerda's work by isolating it from his own context or from the subsequent developments within the Reformed Churches (Liberated) would be nothing less than a violation of his own commitment to ecclesial exegesis and theology.