DORT AND ITS CONTROVERSIES

by Robert Letham

Occasion

THE SYNOD OF DORT met from November 1618 to May 1619, in the turmoil caused by the Arminian crisis in the Netherlands, together with the emergence of the Dutch Republic in the wake of the fight for liberation from Spain. This confluence of theological and political dimensions was to be repeated, in a different context, with the establishment of the Westminster Assembly. It could be argued that any major strategic dogmatic pronouncement requires a political crisis of the first magnitude to precipitate it.

The Remonstrant controversy

While there were rumblings of various kinds before, the Arminian controversy erupted soon after Arminius' appointment as Professor of Theology at Leiden. Demands for discipline were heard from 1605, but he was protected by the civil authorities, led by Johann van Oldenbarnevelt, who controlled the province of Holland. In 1609 Arminius died and a twelve year truce was signed in the war with Spain. A deep-seated division in the constitutional fabric of the United Provinces emerged, the two principal leaders, Oldenbarneveldt and Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, drifting into increasing disagreement and conflict. Eventually, this political division centered on theological issues connected with Arminianism and the demand by the orthodox for a national synod to settle the affair.[1]

Meanwhile, following his death, Arminius' supporters issued their *Remonstrance* in 1610. It contained five articles: (1) God determined before the foundation of the world to save in, for and through Christ those who will believe and persevere to the end, and to damn unbelievers, leaving them to their sin. Consequently, faith and perseverance are prior to election, God electing those he foresaw will believe and persevere. Correspondingly, reprobation is a response of God to human sin and unbelief. Predestination is contingent on the human response. (2) Christ, by his death, obtains forgiveness and redemption for everyone. However, these things are provisional and are enjoyed by believers only. Therefore, Christ's death makes

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1. Donald Sinnema, "Canons of Dort: From Judgment on Arminianism to Confessional Standard" in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort (1618-1619),* ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 313–34, here 314.

salvation possible, contingent on human appropriation. (3) Humans are unable to exercise saving faith themselves but need the grace of God to renew them. This was superficially the least controversial of the five affirmations but it was integrally related to the problematic fourth. (4) All good deeds are due to the grace of God in Christ but this grace is not intrinsically effectual, for it requires the cooperation of the sinner. The tendency here is towards synergism. (5) Those who are in Christ by faith have full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world and the flesh. Perseverance is by the grace of the Holy Spirit but we co-operate. Here synergism is explicit. Furthermore, whether believers are capable of falling from grace is left open.[2]

The orthodox saw these articles as a threat to the confession of the Dutch Reformed Church and published a reply, the *Contra-Remonstrance* in 1611. By 1618 the political divisions reached a head, Oldenbarneveldt was imprisoned, and a national synod called. There was great interest in the controversy throughout Europe, especially in Germany, France and England, where James I saw himself as the defender of Reformed doctrine.

On 11 November 1617 the States-General convened the national synod. Within days, the Synod requested thirteen Remonstrant leaders to appear so their ideas could be evaluated. On 6 December the Remonstrants appeared. The initial focus was on the five articles. However, the Remonstrants did not co-operate, and on 1 January the States-General determined that, if the situation continued as it was, they were to be judged on the basis of their writings. On 14 January 1619 they were summarily dismissed.[3] As a result, the Synod considered more Arminian works than the five articles of the Remonstrants.[4]

The Synod was international in scope. The only major Reformed church not represented was the French, its delegation forbidden from attending by Louis XIII, although the Lutheran governor prevented the Brandenberg delegation from coming. In addition to the twenty-five delegates from foreign churches, five theological professors in the United Provinces formed a separate delegation. Various provincial churches in the Netherlands also sent delegations of their own, totalling fifty-six. Eighteen political commissioners from the various parts of the Netherlands were appointed by the States-General.

The Synod framed five canons summarizing the orthodox position on each of the five Remonstrant articles: (1) Faith depends on election, which is unconditional, and not on anything in humans. Reprobation also depends on the will of God, although on account of human sin. (2) Christ's death is of sufficient value to atone for all, and so the promise of the gospel is to be proclaimed to all without exception. However, the *intent* of the atonement is the salvation of the elect. (3 and 4) All people are incapable of saving good and are in bondage to sin, both actual and original. In the gospel, God sincerely offers eternal life to all who believe in him. Those who reject this offer have

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2. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 3:545–49.

3. Donald Sinnema, "Canons of Dort," 314.

4. Aza Goudriaan, "Dort on Arminian Anthropology," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort (1618-1619),* ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 81–106, here 84–86.

only themselves to blame. Those who obey the call do so wholly due to the grace of God which is effectual and gratuitous. (5) Those God calls and to whom he gives faith he preserves in Christ so they neither totally nor finally can fall from grace.[5]

For the purposes of this paper I will omit consideration of the Synod's procedures, other than to remark that each of the five heads of doctrine were considered in turn, with the delegations presenting their own reports one at a time, consisting of positive statements on each head, together with a series of errors to be rejected, before the final draft was made.

Controversies within the Synod

The Synod operated largely *in camera*. The *Acta* contain the final proposals of the delegations but not the discussion by which they were reached. Walter Balcanqual, a member of the delegation from Great Britain (representing the Scottish church) wrote a series of letters providing some clues on the back-stage intrigues but these are incomplete and limited by his particular biases. While we will refer to the Synod's rejection of Remonstrant theology, our focus will be the divisions that existed within and among the Synod's own delegations. What we do know is that there were four main controversies at Dort.

Christ as *fundamentum electionis*

The first controversy erupted over the relationship of election to Christ. The Remonstrants, following Arminius, had stressed Christ as *fundamentum electionis* in their first article, allowing room for a doctrine of election based on God's foreknowledge of human actions, in which God did not choose anyone in particular but rather foresaw that certain humans would choose Christ. As a result, the Dutch were averse to this expression. Some members of foreign delegations, not having had direct contact with the Remonstrants, sought to do justice to the clearly Biblical *in Christo* dimension of election by making Christ not only executor but also foundation of election. Although, even more than Balcanqual a not entirely reliable witness, John Hales, Chaplain to Sir Dudley Carleton, English Ambassador at The Hague, records of the debate on 22 January 1619:

> It hath been lately questioned, how Christ is said to be *fundamentum electionis*. The doctrine generally received by the contra-remonstrants in this point is, that God first of all resolved upon the salvation of some singular persons; and in the second place, upon Christ as a means to bring this decree to pass. So that with them God the Father alone is the author of election, and Christ only the executioner. Others on the contrary teach, that Christ is so to be held *fundamentum electionis*, as that he is not only the executioner of election, but the author and procurer of it: for the proof of which they bring the words of the apostle to the Ephesians ... '*elegit nos in Christo, ante jacta*

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5. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:550f.

mundi fundamenta.' The exposition of this text was the especial thing discussed at this meeting: and some taught, that Christ was *fundamentum electionis*, because he was *primus electorum*, or because he is *fundamentum beneficiorum* which descend upon us; others brookt none of those restraints. Dr. Gomarus stands for the former sentence, and in defence of it had many things to say on Friday. This night Martinius of Breme[n] being required to speak his mind, signified to the synod, that he had some scruple concerning ... the manner of Christ's being *fundamentum electionis*, and that he thought Christ not only the effector of our election, but also the author and procurer thereof.[6]

Thereupon Gomarus challenged Martinius to a duel!

This might lead us to suppose that Martinius might have been somewhat favorably inclined to the Remonstrants. That would be wrong. In *Christiana et Catholica fides,* he had treated both providence and predestination in close connection under the doctrine of God.[7] He held to double predestination[8] and to the Bezan distinction between the decree of election and its execution, which plays an important part throughout his theology.[9] But he was not a card-carrying Bezan as is clear by his infralapsarianism.[10] He held to definite atonement, with a clear stress on its efficacy.[11] The Dort controversy led him, in the heat of argument, to positions weaker than

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6. John Hales, *Letters from the Synod of Dort to Sir Dudley Carlton, the English Embassador at the Hague* (Glasgow, 1765), 137-38.

7. Matthias Martinius, *Christiana et catholica fides* (Bremen, 1618), Part 1. Also. idem*, Summula S. theologiae* (Bremen, 1610), where occurs the following order: God, the decrees (providence and predestination), the execution of the decree of providence, the execution of the decree of predestination; idem*, Epitome S. theologiae methodice dispositae* (Bremen, 1614): idem*, Quaestiones praecipuae, eaque nude propositae de universa doctrina Christiana:* editio altera (Bremen, 1617), 49-51.

8. Martinius, *Epitome,* 74: "Reprobatio ... est decretum, quo statuit Deus quosdam creaturas intelligentes in malo, quod sibi attracturas sciebat, justa cum severitate relinquere." Matthias Martinius, *Synopsis S. theologiae, brevis et methodica, in quatuor libellos distincta* ([Herborn], 1615), 5.

9. Martinius, *Christiana fides,* 82-3; *Summula,* 7-8.

10. Ibid. Also "homines autem quosdam a lapsu erigere statuit misericorditer."; "Deus nos elegit, seu constituit ad salutem obtinendam quosdam de lapso erigere," Martinius, *Epitome,* 71; Matthias Martinius, *Disputationum theologicarum ad summulam S. theologiae enarrandam publice habitam decas prima* (Bremen, 1611), 158-63, here 162.

11. "Christum proprie & plenissime judicio Dei pro nobis satisfecise & nos redemisse ... Filius autem Dei volens, homo factus atque ita nostra naturae particeps, & ad agendum ... potens erat, utroque poenas a nobis debitas pertulit ... Christus proprie & plenissime nos redemit." Matthias Martinius, *Theologia de unica Domini nostri Jesu Christi persona, in duabus naturis* (Bremen, 1614), 153-71, here 154, 156, 163; idem*, Christiana fides,* 425. Also, *ibid.,* 307-08; idem*, Sylloge quaestionum theologicarum ad summulam theologicae accommodaturum* (Bremen, 1610), 29.

typical.[12] He also asserted that election is in Christ.[13] In the proposition that Christ was the *fundamemtum electionis*, his intention seems to have been to safeguard the centrality of Christ.[14] Election is important for him and certainly impacted other areas of his thought, the covenant of grace being made with the elect,[15] as part of the execution of election.[16] In turn, the catholic church consists only of the elect.[17]

The Synod eventually testified to election *in Christo*.[18] In Canons, 1:6 it states "*ad salutem elegit in Christo*." The English translation in Schaff fails to convey the meaning, making *in Christo* qualify *ad salutem*, "he chose to salvation in Christ" rather than being adverbial, describing the manner of God's electing - "he chose in Christ to salvation." This self-evidently involved no capitulation to the Remonstrant doctrine, while simultaneously recognizing the Biblical setting of election in Christ. In this both Gomarus, for all his misgivings, and Martinius could agree.

The starting point of the canon on the first head of doctrine is not election but the gospel. First is the fall of the human race making all worthy of condemnation. God would have done no injustice if he had left all to perish. However, he has shown his love by sending his Son so that all who believe in him might have eternal life. This faith comes through the preaching of the gospel. Those who receive the gospel in faith are delivered from God's wrath and are given life. Faith is a gift of God just as sin is the responsibility of each person. Why some believe and others do not is due to God's decree of election and reprobation.[19] So election and predestination explain what is highlighted in gospel proclamation.[20] In Canons 1:7 the one chosen by God is considered as fallen. This choosing is *in Christ*, whom God appointed as mediator and head of the elect and the *fundamentum salutis*. God decreed to give these elect persons to Christ to be saved by him, to call them, to give them faith, justification, and sanctification, to preserve them in Christ and to glorify them.[21] Redemption depends

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12. W. Robert Godfrey, "Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974), 151-4, 196-200; Walter Balcanqual, *Letters of Walter Balcanqual from the Synod of Dort to the R. Honourable Sir D. Carlton, L. Embassador* (London, 1659), 2-3.

13. Martinius, *Christiana fides,* 82-3.

14. John Hales, *Letters,* 137-38.

15. Martinius, *Christiana fides*, 231.

16. Martinius, *Summula*, 19.

17. Martinius, *Sylloge*, 20.

18. *Canones Synodi Dordrechtanae,* 1:6, in Schaff, *Creeds,* 3:553.

19. Canons 1:1-6, in Schaff, 3:551-3.

20. Cf. Fred H. Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 8f.; "Election is no more the central or primary doctrine of the Canons than it is of Calvin himself."

21. "Est autem electio immutabile Dei propositum, quo ante jacta mundi fundamenta ex universo genere humano, ex primaeva integritate in peccatum et exitium sua culpa prolapso, secundum liberrimum voluntatis suae beneplacitum, ex mere gratia, certam quorundam hominum multitudinem, aliis nec meliorum, nec digniorum, sed in communi miseria cum aliis jacentium, ad salutem elegit in Christo, quem etiam ab aeterno Mediatorem et omnium electorum caput, salutisque fundamentum constituit; atque ita eos ipsi salvandos dare, et ad eius

on, and is an outflow of, God's electing in Christ. The Canons consciously reflect on the *in Christo* dimension, which the English translation misses.[22] Barth is wrong in ascribing to them a *decretum absolutum* lurking behind Christ.[23] Election *in Christo* is there and we should remember that some of the delegates pressed for a greater emphasis on it.

However, the Synod was silent on how Christ is *fundamentum electionis*. It is obvious that there is no provision for the Remonstrant idea. Perhaps the silence was intentional, so as not to commit the Synod to any one particular position but rather to allow both that were held within the orthodox community.

Supralapsarianism

Second, there was disagreement between supralapsarians and infralapsarians. Here, Gomarus was again principal actor, fighting a virtually lone battle on behalf of supralapsarianism. Balcanqual writes of the session on 8 March 1619:

> My Lord this is worth the observing, that there is no Colledge yet which hath not overthrown *Gomarus* his opinion of the subject of Predestination; for though none of them did directly dispute against it, yet all of them expressly took it as granted, that not *homo creabilis*, but *homo lapsus* was *subjectum* both of Election and Reprobation, which I think doth trouble *Gomarus* not a little.[24]

Later, of the session on 11 March, he writes:

> Since all the forraign Divines, without exception, and likewise all the Belgick professors except *Gomarus*, had already delivered their judgements for *homo lapsus*, and that he doubted not but the Provincials would determine the same; it were very fit that the Synod should likewise determine so of it; neither was it any reason that for the particular opinion of one professor, who in this did disassent from the judgement of all the Reformed Churches, the Synod should abstain from determination of the question.[25]

The following day saw the provincial delegations all support the infralapsarian position "and it is to be noted that all of them determined *homo lapsus* to be the subject of Predestination; except *Gomarus* whom all men know to be against it; and the South-

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communionem per verbum et Spiritum suum efficaciter vocare ac trahere; seu vera et ipsum fide donare, justificare, sanctificare, et potenter in Filli sui communione custoditos tandem glorificare decrevit." Canons 1:7 in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:553.

22. *in Christo* (n. 90) qualifies *elegit*. Schaff's translation suggests it qualifies *ad salutem*.

23. Barth, *CD* II/2, 67-69, and the reply by G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 105f., 139f., 155-6.

24. Balcanqual, *Letters*, 20.

25. Balcanqual, *Letters*, 24.

Hollandi, who only said they would determine nothing of it."[26] Hence, while not explicitly rejecting supralapsarianism the Canons support a clear infralapsarianism.[27] This was in line with other confessions extant at the time,[28] although the Lambeth Articles seem to allow for a supralapsarian interpretation.[29]

Definite atonement

Third, controversy raged over the extent of the atonement. Here there was a considerable background to the debate. Peter Lombard had taught that Christ's death was sufficient for all but effective for some. It was a formula that did two things. First, it was an attempt to do justice to the particularity of the atonement in terms of the intention and design of God, with its aim the redemption of the elect. Moreover, it stressed the efficacy of the death of Christ, that it did not simply make redemption available for whoever wanted it, thereby placing the fulcrum of atoning efficacy on the human believing response, but it asserted that at the cross Christ actually achieved expiation and reconciliation for his people. Second and simultaneously, it took into account the universal preaching of the gospel. It asserted that the death of Christ is sufficient to atone for the whole world and thus no deficit can be ascribed to it; rather, the responsibility for rejecting it lies with sinful humans.

While acceptable to Calvin[30] and many others in the Reformed camp, this distinction was regarded with suspicion by some like Beza. Beza had been in dispute with the Lutheran, Jacob Andraeus at the Colloquy of Montbéliard in 1586, where the question was at stake of whether Christ died to atone for the whole human race or whether his intention was to atone efficaciously for the elect. Beza had held firm to the latter point, representing the Reformed consensus. He and those who thought like him were concerned that to affirm that the atonement was sufficient for all weakened its particularity.

The Remonstrants, in contrast, had argued that Christ's death was given for all people without exception, "so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins."[31] Yet "no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer." On the basis of his foreknowledge of this faith, God had elected these believers to salvation. Consequently, the effecting of

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26. Balcanqual, *Letters*, 25.

27. Canons, 1:1, 7, 15, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:551–55.

28 . Belgic Confession, 16, Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:401; Irish Articles, 11-13, Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:528.

29. Lambeth Articles, 1, Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:523.

30. "Qui ...dixerunt, sufficienter pro toto mundo passum esse Christum, sed pro electis tantum efficaciter. Vulgo haec solutio in scholis obtinuit. Ego quanquam verum esse illud dictum fateor, nego tamen praesenti loco quadrare." John Calvin, "Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica. Volumen XX. Commentarii in Epistolas Canonicas" (2009), 155; John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John,* trans., T.H.L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 244.

31. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:546.

atonement was provisional only, contingent on the response of faith, which the Synod emphatically rejected,[32] maintaining that Christ' death itself obtained atonement which, in turn, was consequently applied to the elect.

Most delegates held to the distinction between the universal sufficiency and intentional efficacy for the elect. Some, such as the Genevan delegation, shared Beza's misgivings, which were highlighted by the realization that the Remonstrants could equally well affirm the distinction on the basis of their own doctrine of election, since they identified the elect with believers. However, most agreed that the value of the atonement was infinite due to the person of Christ who achieved it and, importantly, that God's intention in the atonement was co-extensive with his application of it to the elect, there being no disparity between these aspects, so that the atonement was intrinsically efficacious, accomplishing what God intended it to do.

However, the main issue on this article at the Synod surrounded internal disagreements related to hypothetical universalism, represented most notably by John Davenant and Samuel Ward of the British delegation, and by Martinius. While these three held to the effectiveness of the atonement for the elect, they wanted to stress the universal significance of Christ's death. However, some of their language seemed problematic to many.

Davenant had a dualistic view of the covenant of grace. He held that there is a universal covenant, in which forgiveness, justification, and eternal life is to be offered to all people, without distinction and exception, on condition of repentance and faith in Christ. In this sense, the covenant - and the sacrifice of Christ at its heart - is conditional and in many, if not most, cases meets with no positive response. It lacks intrinsic efficacy. However, simultaneously, God promises unconditionally to give redemption, forgiveness, justification and life to his elect - in this case the atonement is intended for the elect and is intrinsically efficacious for them.[33] Hardly surprisingly, although Carleton and Balcanquhall held to conventional Reformed views, Davenant's construction eventually found its way into the British delegation's report, in its third, fourth, and fifth affirmative positions.[34] It is wrong to label this perspective pro-Remonstrant, since it maintains the intrinsic efficacy of Christ's death for the elect.

Divided among themselves and aware of the tensions in the Synod, the British hastily consulted the authorities at home. James I of England (James VI of Scotland) had a personal interest in the proceedings. He wished for nothing new to be introduced, and for the Synod to express a clear Reformed voice consistent with the *Thirty Nine Articles*. These Articles themselves were most naturally understood in hypothetical universalist terms. Against the background of Article XVII which, while possibly

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32. Rejectio errorum, Anthony Milton, ed., *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618–1619): The Church of England Record Society: Volume 13* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2005), 306.

33. John Davenant, "Mors Christi in Sacra Scriptura proponitur ut universalem remedium omnibus," in *Dissertationes duae* (Cambridge, 1650), 10–17, 37, 55, 69, 87.

34. *The Collegiat Suffrage of the Divines of Great Britaine, Concerning the Five Articles Controverted in the Low Countries* (London, 1629), 47; Milton, *The British Delegation*, 245.

implying double predestination, explicitly affirmed single predestination of an infralapsarian kind,[35] Article XXXI (*Of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the cross)* stated

> The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.[36]

A series of exchanges of letters took place, some of which did not arrive in England before the canon was finally completed, due to adverse weather conditions delaying shipping. George Carleton, Bishop of Llandaff, leader of the British delegation and a convinced particularist, led discussions between key players.

Eventually, the final canon expressed the universal sufficiency of Christ's death in a way calculated to win the support of Davenant, Ward and Martinius, while simultaneously safeguarding the orthodox concern for the particularity and efficacy of the *intent* of the atonement, without using the sufficiency-efficiency distinction.[37]

Consequently, in the second head of doctrine, the Canons devote four sections to the universal significance of the cross.

It is an atonement abundantly sufficient for the sins of the whole world. "The death of the sonne of God is the onely, and most perfit sacrifice, and satisfaction for sinnes, of infinite price, and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sinnes of the whole world" (Canon, 2:3).[38] This is entirely unexceptional, a statement which in one way or other can be found in almost all treatises of Reformed theologians of the time.

The value of the death of Christ is infinite because of who he is and what he endured. The value of the death of Christ is due to his being "not onely a true, and perfitly holy man, but the only-begotten sonne of God also" (Canon, 2:4).[39]

Therefore, the gospel promise should be proclaimed to all without exception. Moreover, the promise of the gospel "ought promiscuously, and without distinction, to be declared and published to all men and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the Gospel" (Canon, 2:5).[40]

Unbelief is not due to any supposed defect in Christ's death but is a human responsibility. The fact that many reject the gospel is not due to "any insufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ ... but by their own proper fault" (Canon, 2:6).[41]

Only then do the Canons move on briefly to the intent of the atonement. God intends the *efficacy* of the atonement to extend to the elect. His purpose will be accomplished and the elect will receive salvation. The atonement's efficacy is such that Christ "should effectually redeem out of every people ... all them, and them onely,

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35. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:497–99.
36. *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 646.
37. Godfrey, "Tensions Within International Calvinism," 135–269.
38. Milton, *British Delegation*, 307.
39. Milton, *British Delegation*, 307.
40. Milton, *British Delegation*, 307.
41. Milton, *British Delegation*, 307.

who from eternity were elected unto salvation, and given to him of the Father" (Canon, 2:8).[42]

This statement excludes Remonstrant theology by asserting the intrinsic efficacy of the atonement, it being intended for the elect. However, within the bounds of acceptable doctrine it is nothing if not irenic. It enables all sides to agree, not by sacrificing their own position but by reaching an accord that allows both to be recognized. Its balance leans in a different direction to popular caricatures of definite, or effective, atonement. Dort is faced with a option of following a line of strict logic that might exclude some of its number, people who could find a home within the family of Reformed confessions. It firmly rejects such an approach, choosing instead a course acceptable to the bulk of international Reformed opinion.[43] In doing so, it avoided stressing one side of the equation at the expense of the other.

Fornerod remarks that Diodati, the leading figure in the Genevan delegation, generally thought to be the strongest in favor of an emphatic particularist statement, did not think that hypothetical universalism, expressed by Davenant, posed a threat to the unity of the church, even though he held to a strict doctrine himself. In the context of Dort, hypothetical universalism was much closer to the orthodox view of the Genevans than it was to Arminianism.[44]

Perseverance and the British delegation

Neither the *Thirty-Nine Articles* nor the *Belgic Confession* say anything about perseverance, although the *Heidelberg Catechism*, 1 and 51-64 strongly implies it. Assurance of salvation is at the heart of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and it is hard to see how this could be so without an implicit doctrine of perseverance. Nevertheless, it is true to say that there had been no explicit confessional statement on the matter.

In England, the *Thirty-Nine Articles* were effectively an evangelical tract issued at a time when fierce conflict and disruption had only just ended. Their production followed in the wake of the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558) which had brought a spate of prominent martyrdoms and widespread exiles. As such, they were couched in broad terms, as is evident in the article on the atonement. Article XXXI was a clear statement on election and predestination.

Augustine was the prime authority to which the English church looked. However, Jay Collier remarks that there were differing interpretations of Augustine. These rested

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42. Milton, *British Delegation*, 308; Canons, 2:3-9, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:561–62.

43. Kendall's characterization of Dort as rubber-stamping Bezan theology is misguided; R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175-77. Beza was a thoroughgoing supralapsarian. Dort is, almost to a man, infralapsarian. Beza disliked the distinction between the universal sufficiency and limited efficacy of the atonement because he thought it weakened the emphasis on the particularity of redemption while Dort stresses the universal scope of the atonement.

44. Nicholas Fornerod, "The Canons of the Synod Had Shot Off the Advocate's Head," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort (1618-1619),* ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 181–215, here 211.

on undoubted ambiguities in Augustine's writings.[45] Augustine was emphatic that the elect were given the gift of perseverance by God and, when it is given, a person cannot but persevere.[46] In this, he held firmly to the perseverance of the elect. On the other hand, he acknowledged that to some is given the gift of faith and these are to be reckoned as the children of God but yet perseverance is withheld.[47] While these live piously they are called children of God but, as is evident in 1 John 2:19, if they die in unbelief the reality is that they are not. They were not God's children even when they professed that name "not because they simulated righteousness but because they did not continue in it."[48] This is due to the fact that "some love God, and do not continue in that good way unto the end." They are not called by God according to his purpose.[49] However, these reprobates never had the faith of Christians nor did they eat Christ's flesh or drink his blood.[50] Hence, while Augustine held firmly to the perseverance of the elect, he allowed that some people might be regenerate, have faith and be indistinguishable from the elect but fall away from grace.[51]

Augustine was deployed as an authority by both those who held to the perseverance of the saints and those who maintained that it was possible for a regenerate person to fall from grace. All held that the elect persevere to the end - the Remonstrants could agree, allowing for their particular view of election. One line of thought was that the saints - those who are justified and sanctified - persevere. This left open the question of whether a person who had received grace could fall away and be damned. A stricter position was that all the saints and only the saints persevere - meaning that those who profess faith and subsequently defect were not saints in the first place.

At the Synod the British delegation presented a finely tuned and nuanced statement in its Collegial Suffrage.[52] In its first section, on those who are non-elect, it expressed its opinion that some of the reprobate may be enlightened to the extent of giving assent to the Word of God, having a knowledge and faith giving rise to a change of affections and conduct such that they are taken to be believers, justified and sanctified. Yet they never attain to the state of justification or adoption and so apostatize.[53] This appears to be in line with the broad view of perseverance. However, in doing so, the delegation referred to degrees and types of grace and faith. The reprobate did not possess *saving* faith, and the grace they received was *preparatory*

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45. Jay T. Collier, *Debating Perseverance: The Augustinian Heritage in Post-Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–92.

46. For example, among many others, "Predestination is the preparation for grace, while grace is the donation itself." Augustine, *On the predestination of the saints,* 10:19, *NPNF1,* 5:507: idem*, On perseverance*, 5:9, *NPNF1,* 5:529: idem*, On rebuke and grace,* 7:13, 14, *NPNF1* 7:5:477.

47. Augustine, *On perseverance,* 6:12, 13:33, *NPNF1* 7:5:529, 538: idem*, On rebuke and grace,* 6:9, 7:14, 13:40, *NPNF1* 5:474, 477, 488.

48. Augustine, *On rebuke and grace,* 9:20, *NPNF1,* 5:480.

49. Augustine, *On rebuke and grace,* 9:23, *NPNF1,* 5:481.

50. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John,* 26, on John 6:51, *NPNF1* 7:173.

51. Augustine, *On rebuke and grace,* 9:20-23, *NPNF1,* 5:479-481.

52. Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 59–92.

53. Milton, *British Delegation*, 266–71; Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 64–67.

grace rather than saving grace. Their profession stopped short of placing them into a state of justification and adoption. By these distinctions the delegation was able to maintain an orthodox Reformed doctrine of perseverance while also making allowance for the broader view held by so many of their colleagues at home. Those with saving faith would persevere and could be certain of the fact. This could hardly be said to be a concession to the Remonstrant position which, by its conditional doctrine of election based on foreseen faith, raised an insuperable question mark over the entire doctrine of perseverance.

Part of the reason for this was the large and prominent body of opinion in England that held such a view. King James I had requested moderation and no innovations; the *Thirty-Nine Articles* were silent on the issue and certainly gave little countenance to the strict position. The *Lambeth Articles* had been so edited by Whitgift as to include room for both perspectives. The original proposal of Whitaker - "A true, lively, and justifying faith, and the sanctifying Spirit of God, is neither extinguished nor lost, nor does it depart from those that have once been partakers of it, either totally or finally" - was a robust assertion of the standard doctrine. The final version - "nor does it depart from the elect, either totally or finally" - implies that the non-elect may have true justifying faith and the sanctifying Spirit of God but lose both, so that true believers may fall from grace. [54] No continental confession had made a commitment; the question was a *theologoumenon*, a theological opinion, a widely accepted one, but not yet a confessional commitment.

Moreover, another factor in the delegation's concern to include both perspectives was that they did not want to antagonize the Lutherans and also felt the need to present a united front among all the Reformed in the face of the challenge from Rome - not to mention the need for a firm rebuttal to the Remonstrants. That this was a concern for the delegation is indicated by the fact that its discussion of the fifth head of doctrine occupied forty per cent of its report to the Synod.[55]

The British delegation pressed for a moderate statement that would encompass both perspectives. In part, the Synod met this request. However, on Rejection of Errors 5:3 and 5:7 their representations for flexibility were rejected and an exclusive commitment to the strict position was strongly affirmed.[56]

This created problems for the Reformed community in England in the following decades, Collier argues.[57] If his argument is correct one could posit the idea that the ultimate failure of Puritan theology, and Presbyterian polity, in England in the middle of the century, was at least in part due to the fracture among the Reformed brought about by the inability of the Synod to accommodate the broader position. The nearer consequence was the reluctance of the English church to welcome Dort. James, who enthusiastically endorsed the Synod's findings, died only a few years later, preventing its lasting acceptance; antipathy arose towards those who embraced it.

Is Collier's thesis sustainable? Correspondence between the British delegation and the king on the question is noticeably absent, in stark contrast to the frequent and

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54. Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 30–34.
55. Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 64, 85.
56. Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 83–90.
57. Collier, *Debating Perseverance*, 93ff.

urgent despatches over the extent of the atonement. If this was seen as such a hugely significant matter for the unity of the English church why was this not evident in concerned interaction? Perhaps it could partly be explained that time was running out as discussion came to the fifth head of doctrine. Again, the flood of correspondence back and forth on the second head had bordered on embarrassing for the delegation and it is probable that there was a reluctance to repeat it. Besides, there is no real evidence of a division within the delegation such as there was on the second head.

However, the larger implications of Collier's argument are more in question. There is no indication of explicit controversy on perseverance in the debates at the Westminster Assembly. While the scribe recorded less and less of the details of debates as time went on, he did focus more exactly when there was a matter of discord. The absence of any such evidence indicates that it may not have been as significant a problem as Collier makes out. Indeed, Collier has no discussion of the Assembly and much of his treatment of later English Reformed theology comes from outside its bounds of from the years afterwards.

Assurance

Assurance of salvation lies close to the heart of these issues. While it was not a matter of controversy among the delegations, the way in which it was handled sheds further light on the sensitivity of the Synod to nuances present in Reformed thought. Besides this, Dort's practical and pastoral significance lies in the threat the Remonstrant doctrine of election posed to certainty of salvation.

On the first head of doctrine, attention turns to assurance of election in Canons 1:12. Here the Canons maintain that assurance of election may be attained. It will vary in degrees. It is not definitively the experience of all believers, for its presence will be felt "in due time." The ground of this assurance is in "the infallible fruits of election" - faith in Christ, filial fear, godly sorrow for sin, hungering and thirsting after righteousness.[58] The *syllogismus mysticus* is present, a search for assurance through introspection, as advocated by Lubbertus and his Dutch professorial colleagues. This statement has been seen as an aberration, even by Barth who otherwise defends the validity of the practical syllogism.[59] Others, such as Weber, Niessel, Klingenburg and Woldendorp were more vehement, rejecting the use of such a process altogether. However, Berkouwer took issue with this and defended the Canons, arguing that because of the connections of Scripture, the *syllogismus* in no way contradicts the *sola*

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58. "De hac aeterna et immutabili sui ad salutem electione, electi suo tempore, variis licet gradibus et dispari mensura, certiores redduntur, non quidem arcane et profunditates Dei curiose scrutando; sed fructus electionis infallibiles, in verbo Dei designatos, ut sint vera in Christum fides, filialis Dei timor, dolor de peccatis secundum Deum, esuries et sitis justitiae, etc., in sese cum spirituali gaudio et sancta voluptate observando." Canons, 1:12 in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:554.

59. Barth, *CD* II/2, 340.

fide.[60] While a statement like this is not found in Bucer or Calvin, there were precedents among those who distinguished saving faith and assurance.[61]

However, on the fifth head of doctrine, a different focus is present. Here the Canons consider at some length our certainty of perseverance. Assurance may exist according to the measure of faith. It is a certain persuasion concerning eternal life, implying that this is a normative experience of the faithful.[62] The bases of this assurance are threefold:

> Ac proinde haec certitudo non est ex peculiari quadam revelatione praeter aut extra verbum facta, sed ex fide promissionum Dei, quas in verbo suo copiosissime in nostrum solatium revelavit: ex testimonio *Spiritus Sancti testantis cum spiritu nostro nos esse Dei filios et haeredes*. Rom. viii.16. Denique ex serio et sancto bonae conscientiae et bonorum operum studio. Atque hoc solido obtinendae victoriae solatio, et infallibili aeternae gloriae arrha, si in hoc mundo electi Dei destituerentur, omnium hominum essent miserrimi.[63]

The focus is on the promises of God in his word, following the consensus of the delegations. Moreover, while sanctification and good works have a place they are last in order, certainly not dominant. Here the force of the *denique* should be realized. Sanctification supports assurance only when assurance is already grounded elsewhere, on the promise of God and the work of the Spirit. The contradiction in the *Rejectio*

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60. M. Weber, *Gesammelte aufsatze zur religions-soziologie* (Tübingen, 1924), 1:93-127; W. Niesel, 'Syllogismus practicus?', in *Aus theologie und geschichte* (Neukirchen, 1933), 158-79; G. Klingenburg, *Das verhaltnis Calvins zu Butzer untersucht auf grund der wirtschafts-ethischen bedeutung beider Reformatoren* (Bonn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1912); J.J. Woldendorp, 'Heeft de Dordtsche Synode een nadere hervorming van node?', *Onder Eigen Vaandel* 5 (1930), 25-46. These are all cited by Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 279ff, especially 298-302.

61. The pastoral emphasis is clear. With certainty threatened by the Remonstrants, the delegates were doubly concerned to safeguard the practical and pastoral effects of their teaching. So much is clear in the *Rejectio errorum* under the first head of doctrine, where in *Rejectio* 1:7 the Synod rejects conditional election precisely because it takes away certainty, condemning "Qui docent, 'Electionis immutabilis ad gloriam nullum in hac vita esse fructum, nullum sensum, nullam certitudinem, nisi ex conditione mutabili et contingente.' Praeterquam enim quad absurdum sit ponere certitudinem incertam, adversantur haec experientiae sanctorum, qui cum Apostolo ex sensu electionis sui exultant, Deique hoc beneficium celebrant, qui *gaudent* cum discipulis, secundum Christi admonitionem, *quod nomina sua scripta sunt in coelis*:...qui sensum denique electionis ignitis tentationum diabolicarum telis opponunt, quaerentes, *Quis intentabit crimina adversus electos Dei?*" Rejectio 1:7, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:558.

62. "De hac electorum ad salutem custodia, vereque fidelium in fide perseverantia, ipsi fideles certi esse possum, et sunt pro mensura fidei, qua certo credunt se esse et perpetuo mansuros vera et viva Ecclesiae membra, habere remissionem peccatorum, et vitam aeternam." Canons 5:9, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:572.

63. Canons 5:10, in Schaff, *Creeds, 3:573.*

errorum 5:5 is more apparent than real. There certainty is said to come "non ex speciali et extraordinaria revelatione, sed ex propriis filiorum Dei signis, et constantissimis Dei promissionibus."[64] Notably, Scriptural proof is found in Romans 8:39, pointing directly to the promise of God. Then follows 1 John 3:24 referring to the ministry of the Spirit. Berkouwer thinks the Synod did not view these emphases as competitive and so "their alternate manner of speaking is not ... illegitimate."[65] The Synod saw them co-existing rather than irreconcilable or contradictory. They did not make sanctification the primary basis of assurance.

The Canons recognize that assurance is not always a conscious presence for believers. "Carnal doubts" and "grievous temptations" may arise, obscuring the certainty they possess. Yet God preserves them at such times and will eventually restore assurance to their consciousness. Again, the Holy Spirit arouses it, not sanctification.[66] But far from encouraging indolence and presumptuous security, assurance is an incentive to gratitude and good works.[67] Among those restored from backsliding it fosters a concern to continue in obedience to God and, in turn, it is maintained by obedience. Here the Canons guard against charges of antinomianism rather than explain the ground of assurance. They claim an inseparable connection between assurance and sanctification. Those who have assurance seek to obey God. In obeying God their assurance is maintained. The Synod reacts against suggestions that assurance breeds moral indolence or that it can be possessed irrespective of the quality of the life lived.[68] Assurance is preserved and developed through the use of the Word and sacraments.[69]

The Canons follow the consensus of the delegations on the fifth head of doctrine. Perseverance is an outflow of election and thus a gift of God, not a condition of the new covenant.[70] Therefore the elect cannot fall from grace finally or totally. This certainty is based on the promise and purpose of God, although the inextricable connection between assurance and sanctification is taken into account. Ultimately assurance encourages moral effort and does not diminish it. The gratuity of salvation is a stimulus to gratitude.

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64. Rejectio errorum 5:5, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:575.

65. Berkouwer, *Divine election,* 301.

66. "Ac per Spiritum Sanctum perseverantiae certitudinem in iisdem rursum excitat." Canons 5:11, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:573.

67. Canons 5:12, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:573

68. "Neque etiam in iis, qui a lapsu instaurantur, lasciviam aut pietatis injuriam procreat rediviva perseverantiae fiducia; sed multo majorem curam de viis Domine solicite custodiendis, quae praeparatae sunt ut in illis ambulando perseverantiae suae certitudinem retineant." Canons, 5:13 in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:573. Rejectio errorum 5:6, in ibid., 3:575 is written against those "Qui docent, 'Doctrinam de perseverantiae ac salutis certitudine, ex nature et indole sua, esse carnis pulvinar, et pietati, bonis moribus, precibus allisque sanctis exercitiis noxiam; contra vero de ea dubitare, esse laudabile.'"

69. Canons 5:14 in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:574.

70. Rejectio errorum 5:1, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:574.

The way the Synod handles these two related issues is significant. When dealing with election, gracious and unconditional, it points to certainty available from the evidence of the fruit of election in the faithful. The eternal decree is made evident in its temporal consequence. However, when face to face with the turmoil in which the faithful persevere, assurance is primarily derived from the free promises of God. The temporal struggle is sustained by God's eternal purpose. In both cases, assurance arises from an evidential factor located in a countervailing balance.

Conciliation

First, on election the Remonstrant idea that election was based on God's foreknowledge was rejected;[71] so too was the claim outlawed that Christ was the foundation of election viewed as the foundation of a salvation contingent on the exercise of faith by indeterminate persons rather than as head of a body that God chose, composed of persons who he had determined to be saved.[72]

However, within the bounds of acceptable doctrine allowance was made for distinct nuances. The Canons asserted that election is in Christ, maintaining the orthodox and Biblical understanding, viewing it as the definitive choice of those persons who God decided to be saved but founded on the headship of Christ (Canons, 1:7). This allowed for both Gomarus and Martinius to confess the same declaration.

Second, on the order of decrees, a clear position was taken but with no rejection of the alternative. Canon 1:7 is infralapsarian.[73] Reprobation is preterition, God passing by the non-elect (Canon 1:15).[74] God is not the author of sin. But there is no condemnation of supralapsarianism.

Third, the main focus on the second head of doctrine is on the universal sufficiency of the atonement, satisfying the hypothetical universalists, but not to the exclusion of its efficacy for the elect. We noted that the strong particularist Diodati thought that despite these factors the real questions were not compromised.

Fourth, there was resistance to the British delegation's irenic proposal on perseverance. According to Collier, this effectively divided the English Reformed camp. Even if we reject what might seem to be a corollary of this argument, that the refusal of the Synod to accommodate a different nuance on perseverance may have been a contributory factor in the divisions that led to the Civil War, which divisions are still with us, it would seem to be a salutary lesson that in statements such as these one cannot be too careful.

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71. Rejectio errorum, 1:5, Milton, *British Delegation*, 303.

72. Rejectio errorum, 1:1-9, Milton, *British Delegation*, 302–4.

73. "He hath chosen in Christ unto salvation a set number of certaine men ... lying in common misery with others." Canon 1:7, Milton, *British Delegation*, 299.

74. Canon 1:15, Milton, *British Delegation*, 301.

Fifth, the differing emphases on assurance in the first and fifth heads of doctrine can be seen as balancing strategies; with election, the focus is on its fruits of election as a basis for assurance, while on perseverance and the struggles of the Christian life, attention is directed to certainty of the gospel promises in Christ. Both poles are present, stressed appropriately for the distinct pastoral circumstances that these differing realities engender.