

# **The Theology of the Canons of Dort: A Reassessment after Four Hundred Years**

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## **Abstract**

This article reassesses the value of the Canons of Dort, drafted at the Synod of Dort (1618–19). A picture with diverse shades emerges. After four hundred years, the Canons of Dort stand out when compared to the Remonstrant position for their pastoral tone, Reformed catholicity, emphasis on the efficacy of divine grace, an infralapsarian stance on the decrees of God, and their biblical character. In retrospect, however, the Canons also show theological limitations such as allowing the dominance of the Arminian agenda, the potentially problematic nature of complex, causal logic, the deficiency of certain important biblical notions, and a deficiency as to the centrality of Christ. Christ as the mirror of election in particular deserves a more central place in the doctrine of election.

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## I. Introduction

**T**he Canons of Dort, drafted and accepted during the international Synod of Dort, which drew delegates from the major Reformed national churches (1618–19), are a hallmark of orthodox, Reformed theology.<sup>1</sup> They originate in a dispute that arose in the middle of the twelve-year truce during the Dutch war with Spain (1568–1621) between the Leiden professors Arminius and Gomarus. The dispute was sparked by debate over justification, but Arminius steered it in the direction of the issue of predestination. After Arminius’s death in 1609, his followers wrote their *Remonstrance*, containing five articles: (1) election is based on faith, which is foreseen by God; (2) Christ died for all people, accomplished atonement for all, but only believers enjoy its benefits; (3) no man has saving faith in himself, but humans must be born again through the Holy Spirit; (4) grace is resistible; and (5) the saints can fall from grace. The Canons of Dort are a written response to the *Remonstrance*, following even its chapter divisions. Since the implications of the third article are only visible in combination with the fourth, the Canons of Dort have a combined chapter 3/4. Thus, the chapters run: (1) election; (2) the extent of the atonement; (3/4) human depravity and regeneration; and (5) the perseverance of saints.<sup>2</sup>

After four hundred years, a reappraisal of the Canons of Dort’s strengths and weaknesses is needed from a theological point of view. This historical distance can easily be sensed. The scholastic discourse that stamped the discussions at Dort is no longer in vogue, later discussions concerning the relation between election and covenant were unknown to the seventeenth-century delegates, and, most importantly, philosophical developments have shaped the further course of Western theology. In 1619, the Cartesian dichotomy between the subject (*res cogitans*) and the outer world (*res extensa*), which would cause the Reformed much trouble, was not even on the table, although the issues of subjectivity and personal appropriation of salvation were more central to the Synod’s debates than they had been for John Calvin. Meanwhile, ideas in the philosophical mainstream and popular

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief introduction, see Herman J. Selderhuis, “Introduction to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619),” in Donald Sinnema et al., *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae, 1618–1619*, ed. Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 1:xv–xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> See the full text: Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 3:550–80; <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.xvi.html>. The modern English translation used in the present article is <https://www.rca.org/resources/canons-dort>.

understandings have shifted. While Arminius was among the first theologians from a Reformed background to emphasize human initiative as decisive for human destiny, this emphasis has become the accepted dogma of the later phases of modernity. On the other hand, late modernity has seen the rise of philosophical movements and scientific viewpoints that counter the idea of human autonomy, for instance in the denial of human consciousness by Daniel Dennett.<sup>3</sup> Some emphases of the Canons, which combine the denial of human autonomy as decisive for regeneration and real human responsibility, predestination, and a contingent (nonnecessary) reality, are even more relevant than in the seventeenth century. The fronts have shifted: while the Reformed were under suspicion of determinism in early modernity, neuroscience in the postmodern era presents a form of determinism that Reformed people will wish to refute. How do the Canons sound after four hundred years?

The present article offers a rereading of the Canons in light of the present day, intending to pass this heritage along for future generations. This desire for transmission after four hundred years implies appreciation, appropriation, and critique: it cannot be expected that even the finest Reformed representatives of the early seventeenth century, in the heat of vigorous debate, could have drafted a theology without any downsides. The present article briefly highlights five positive aspects of the Canons and four limitations before offering a conclusion.

## II. *Positive Aspects of the Canons*

### 1. *Pastoral Character*

Since the Canons of Dort were born in a situation of intense conflict, vigorous polemics, and animosity between Remonstrants and contra-Remonstrants, tensions among the delegates at the Synod were to be expected. However, the fierceness of Franciscus Gomarus's anger, which led him to challenge Matthias Martinius of Bremen to a duel, strikes the modern reader as excessive.<sup>4</sup> In this light, it is remarkable that the result of these debates, the Canons, strike a popular, often pastoral tone rather than a polemical one. The polemic with the Remonstrants was unequivocal, but the mode of teaching in the Canons was accessible to ordinary church

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Lee Gattiss, "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 155. Gomarus's request was not granted, even after he repeated it. The fight went on verbally.

members, while those who had received formal theological training could identify the theological systems behind the Canons. The pastoral tone of the Canons stands out, particularly when compared to the so-called “judgments” (*judicia*), the opinions of the various delegations, which were written in a scholastic style.<sup>5</sup>

The pastoral character can be illustrated by two examples. First, deceased infants. The Remonstrants criticized the doctrine of predestination as implying that “many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers’ breasts and cruelly cast into hell” (Conclusion). The Canons offer comfort by stating that “godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy” (1.17).<sup>6</sup> A second example is found in the discussion of conversion. The Synod shows awareness of the doubts and temptations that can assail the human heart:

Those who do not yet actively experience within themselves a living faith in Christ..., but who nevertheless use the means by which God has promised to work these things in us—such people ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor to count themselves among the reprobate; rather they ought to continue diligently in the use of the means. (1.16)

This pastoral tone is not merely the icing on the cake but is integral to the thrust of the Canons. While many delegates advocated a supralapsarianism that tends to make election and reprobation twins and leads to thorny pastoral questions, the Canons take an infralapsarian approach at the beginning of the various chapters. These begin with human sin and guilt. Moreover, the “Conclusion” of the Canons emphatically rejects the position of those who teach “that in the same manner [*eodem modo*] in which election is the source and cause of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause of unbelief and ungodliness.”

The deepest pastoral level is that of God’s sovereign, effective grace. The Remonstrants’ message presupposes that human beings will freely make the right choice once their will is properly informed by their intellect and

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<sup>5</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, “Popular and Catholic: The *Modus Docendi* of the Canons of Dordt,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt, 1618–1619*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg, Brill’s Series in Church History 49 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 243–60. Only the judgment from the delegates of the Palatinate offered an example of a *modus docendi*, a mode of teaching, in a popular style.

<sup>6</sup> Erik A. de Boer, “‘O, Ye Women, Think of Thy Innocent Children, When They Die Young!’ The Canons of Dordt (First Head, Article Seventeen) between Polemic and Pastoral Theology,” in Goudriaan and van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 261–90.

when God persuades them.<sup>7</sup> However, for those who feel themselves incapable of spiritual good and realize that only God can save them, the Canons of Dort provide the comfort of God's thoroughly effective grace. Moreover, the pastoral tone of the Canons inspires lyrical passages on God's grace: regeneration is "an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead" (3/4.12).

## 2. Catholic Stance

The catholicity of the Canons of Dort has a material and a formal perspective. Firstly, the material side. By rejecting the Remonstrant position, the Canons of Dort continued the traditional line of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin, all of whom taught predestination in the sense of both election and reprobation. Dort's doctrine of election is neither a Reformed "central dogma" nor a Reformed "in-house specialty." This catholicity can be illustrated by conflicts similar to the one preceding the Synod of Dort in Roman Catholic circles. At the University of Louvain, also in the Low Countries, the Jesuit Leonard Lessius provoked the Augustinian Michael Baius, who allegedly held Protestant or Protestant-like views, leading to the controversy *de Auxiliis* 1586–88. The Louvain faculty condemned theses by Lessius as Pelagian. In a letter to the Inquisition, Bellarminus identified the issues of cooperation, providence, grace, and election as the four main points of disagreement.<sup>8</sup> A similar debate took place between the Dominican Domingo Báñez and the Jesuit Luis de Molina, whose idea of middle knowledge (*scientia media*) was highly influential on Arminius's ideas of election and justification.<sup>9</sup> While Aquinas's theology was an important point of reference for all, Báñez, Baius, and Gomarus took the direction of a strictly Augustinian view of human sinfulness and the gratuity of grace, while Bellarminus, Suárez, Molina, Lessius, and Arminius emphasized a decisive moment of divine-human cooperation. In terms of the Thomist tradition, the traditional Thomism of the Dominicans was against the Jesuit

<sup>7</sup> See Aza Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dordt on Arminian Anthropology," in Goudriaan and van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 81–106.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Joseph Matava, *Divine Causality and Human Free Choice: Domingo Báñez, Physical Premotion, and the Controversy De Auxiliis Revisited*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 252 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 23–29.

<sup>9</sup> Matava, *Divine Causality*, ch. 2–4; cf. Guido Stucco, *The Catholic Doctrine of Predestination* (n.p.: Xlibris, 2014), ch. 4–5. Cf. Henri A. G. Blocher, "'Middle Knowledge': Solution or Seduction," *Unio cum Christo* 4.1 (April 2018): 29–46.

renewal of Thomism.<sup>10</sup> The Jesuit order, founded only decades before in 1534, won the battle in the Roman Catholic Church and managed to get Baius convicted. In Reformed circles, the Augustinian emphasis on grace prevailed, and Molina's idea of *middle knowledge* was perceived—for instance by one of the youngest delegates at Dort, Voetius—as leading to Pelagianism.<sup>11</sup> Roughly speaking, Dort is Augustine against Pelagius again, at least in the Reformed view.

The catholicity of the Canons of Dort also exists on the formal level. Delegations were present from all over the Reformed world except France.<sup>12</sup> By inviting these delegates, the Dutch saw that the weighty matters at hand needed to be decided by the catholic, Reformed church. Thus, the Synod of Dort was not merely a “national” synod but also an international council. This highlights a general willingness to reach agreements amid dissent. For instance, there were disagreements between the strong supralapsarians of the southern Netherlands and the Bremen delegation, who were strongly opposed to supralapsarianism and showed a measure of sympathy for the Remonstrants. In particular, Matthias Martinius's emphasis on the universal nature of Christ's sacrifice seemed dangerously close to the universal atonement taught by the Remonstrants. This led to suspicions and the marginalization of the delegates from Bremen; they almost went home because of the animosity (exemplified by Gomarus's intended duel). The English delegation served as a go-between to mitigate the animosity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, unity was maintained, the Bremen delegates stayed, and a document was drafted that could be supported by the entire Reformed community, variegated though this community was. The committees presented draft after draft until consensus was found. That itself is a remarkable, and admirable, outcome.

This achievement may still be admired four hundred years later. The Reformed world has not always been an example of this catholic spirit that could bridge major theological differences.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 272.

<sup>11</sup> Gisbertus Voetius, *Gisberti Voeti theologiae in acad: Ultraiectina professoris selectarum disputationum theologiarum, pars prima* (Utrecht, 1648), 246–64; online, <http://www.e-rara.ch/doi/10.3931/e-rara-22314>.

<sup>12</sup> See Fred van Lieburg, “The Participants at the Synod of Dort,” in Sinnema, Moser, and Selderhuis, *Acta et Documenta*, 1:lxiii–cvii.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005).

### 3. *Effective Grace*

The effectiveness of grace is the prime concern of the Canons of Dort because of the character of God, salvation, grace itself, and humans. First, grace is effective because God does not stop halfway, leaving it up to humans to make his work complete or not. Second, when Jesus Christ is rightly called savior, he must actually save people, not make their salvation possible. The atonement is not the opening of a possibility but the complete accomplishment of redemption.<sup>14</sup> Third, grace is effective because grace is a relational term, used to denote the personal character of God's dealings with people. Grace is not about a transaction. If grace were not effective, it would not renew sinners and would be comparable to a substance or fluid that has been made available for those who are willing to use it.<sup>15</sup> Instead, God's grace is a matter of love. Fourth, grace must be effective because of human total depravity: unregenerate sinners cannot save themselves, nor contribute anything to their salvation. Once regenerated, the will starts willing, and people begin to be converted (3/4.11).

In the background, particularly to the fourth point, lies a question of theological anthropology. Remonstrants thought more optimistically about the status of human beings after the fall than mainstream Reformed theologians. With respect to the intellect, Arminians attributed a positive role to some natural abilities, particularly the so-called "light of nature" (*lumen naturae*) that would enable humans to attain grace.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, the Arminians taught that no supernatural gifts—e.g., of integrity and righteousness—of the will had been lost in the fall, because the will was never endowed with these in the first place. This position means that the will is in the same condition as it was before the fall, a view suspiciously similar to the Jesuit notion of creation "in pure nature (*in puris naturalibus*)."<sup>17</sup> Aza Goudriaan even notes that Arminians "had a more optimistic view about the current integrity of the human will than Molina."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the Arminians employed a different definition of the freedom of the will than the Reformed. Although the *Remonstrance* itself did not explicitly mention it, the Arminians defined the freedom of the will as

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<sup>14</sup> Because effectiveness is the intent of the Canons' discussion of the extent of the atonement, the often-used acronym "TULIP" for the five points of Calvinism is incorrect, at least as far as the "L" of "limited atonement" is concerned. Indeed, the issue is not that atonement would be subject to any limitation, but that it is effective, definite.

<sup>15</sup> The Canons do sometimes use substantial language next to the personal language. In the opinion of the present author, this weakens the Canons' defense against "grace" in the Remonstrant sense.

<sup>16</sup> Goudriaan, "Arminian Anthropology," 90–94.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 100–101; quote on p. 101.

freedom from necessity (understood as *equilibrium*).<sup>18</sup> The will was conceived as neutral between good and evil, free from any determination, open for persuasion either way, like Hercules at the crossroads. The Synod, however, emphasized that the will is free in the sense that it chooses spontaneously, but since it is dead in spiritual matters, it is inclined to evil and will in effect always choose evil. “Since the Fall ... the human will has no ability to choose well spiritually.”<sup>19</sup> For Arminians, this was an outright denial of human freedom, while for the Synod, the Arminian position meant an overly optimistic view of the human status after the fall. It is, however, not enough for God to make us a good offer and to persuade us to accept it, tweaking possible worlds to make it happen. For the Synod, it is necessary that the Holy Spirit apply the redemption Christ has accomplished to the elect, and that the Triune God guarantee the salvation of the elect by his eternal council; otherwise, no one would be saved.

For the present day, Dort’s accent on effective grace stands over against the background of a culture of unbelief. In this context, it is encouraging and comforting to confess that God himself bestows his effective grace on humans. More than ever, we realize that humans are not rational creatures who will choose good if only they receive the right information. Human beings prefer falsehood over truth, are often irrational, and act in conflict with their best interests. Only effective grace can save.

#### 4. *The Human Condition before God*

The Canons of Dort emphasize the human condition before God as that of limited and fallen creatures. Firstly, human knowledge is limited. The Canons warn us not to investigate curiously into the depths of God.<sup>20</sup> Assurance of election, for instance, comes “not by inquisitive searching (*curiose scrutando*) into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God’s Word” (1.12, cf. 1.14, 3/4.7). This

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<sup>18</sup> For Arminius, freedom as spontaneity is insufficient; freedom of indifference is required for freedom to be real freedom. Cf. Eef Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas: Vrijheid, genade en predestinatie in de theologie van Jacobus Arminius, 1559–1609* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), 133–56. Some Reformed theologians also taught freedom of indifference, but not in the Arminian sense of *equilibrium*, which denies the distinction between absolute and implicative necessity; see Willem J. van Asselt, ed., *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 197, 231–42.

<sup>19</sup> Goudriaan, “Arminian Anthropology,” 98.

<sup>20</sup> Warnings against curiosity are a *topos* in the Reformed tradition since Calvin; cf. Eginhard Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde: Ein Beitrag zum Vergleich zwischen reformatorischem und patristischem Denken* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1980).

modesty could be considered to be a mere smoke screen to hide the anomalies of Reformed theology; it must have been irritating to the Remonstrants. It is, however, inherent to the Canons as a whole. The main reason is that God's work as such is of a different quality from any human work: the operation of the Holy Spirit is hidden and unspeakable (*arcana et ineffabilis operatio*, 3/4.12).

Secondly, the infralapsarian setup of the Canons fits this modest approach well. The opening sections of the first chapter are a brief overview of salvation history, starting with the fall and human depravity (1.1), moving via the gospel of Jesus Christ in John 3:16 (1.2) to the preaching of this gospel (1.3), and its effect in belief and unbelief (1.4). Only then do the Canons move on to God's eternal decree (1.5–6). The other chapters also open with the serious nature of sin (2.1; 3/4.1; 5.1), which God counters with his grace.

Because of this position of human beings as sinners before God, faith and unbelief are not parallel phenomena. While people are to be blamed for their unbelief, faith is a gift of God (1.5). While the cause of the undeserved election "is exclusively the good pleasure of God" (1.10), reprobation means that some people "have been passed by (*praeteritos*) in God's eternal election," so that God leaves (*relinquere*) them in the misery into which they have plunged themselves (1.15). It may seem logical to ascribe reprobation to God's will as much as election; the Canons, however, forbid such parallel causality, and that reprobation would be the cause of unbelief.<sup>21</sup> That would render God the author of sin.

In the background lies a classic discussion concerning reprobation, which dates back to Augustine. The question is whether reprobation should be understood in a negative way (God's will not to elect some), or in a positive way (God's will to actually damn people). Scholastic distinctions had further refined this discussion. For instance, while the Canons deny that reprobation is the *efficient* cause of unbelief, many of the Reformed theologians did teach that reprobation was in fact the *deficient* cause of unbelief.<sup>22</sup>

The condition of humans as sinners is not as generally accepted today as it was back then. Through modernism and postmodernism, Westerners have become impressed by the historical, subjective, and fragmented character of knowledge. This makes any God-talk potentially problematic. But the Canons' accent on God's sovereignty in reprobation is even problematic from the perspective of present-day Western common sense, which has been

<sup>21</sup> See Donald W. Sinnema, "The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) in Light of the History of This Doctrine" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1985), 429.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

stamped by the Enlightenment: the immeasurable and incommensurable value of each human being. It seems unthinkable that God, who is love in himself, would say no to humans, his creatures, in a definitive, eternal way. Here, at this sore point, modesty is needed in a new sense. If the seventeenth-century theology did not wish to solve the tension between the presence of sin in the world and God's omnipotence, so the present challenge is to maintain both God's loving goodness and his judgment of humans.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. *Biblical Character*

A final positive aspect of the Canons of Dort is related to the infralapsarian approach: the biblical, nonspeculative character of the Canons. The Canons present the biblical narrative as a sequence of creation, fall, redemption, and glory, centered on Christ. Although the exegesis of texts will be questioned from the perspective of modern exegesis, the intention of the Synod clearly is to reason from Scripture. Its heart, as far as election is concerned, is found in the letters of Paul, particularly the letter to the Romans, and within that letter chapters 8–11, which explicitly deal with the sovereignty of God, election, and reprobation. The Canons focus on the notion that God is not unjust when his purpose of election stands, “not because of works but because of him who calls” (Rom 9:11 *ESV*). Being saved does not depend “on human will or effort, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom 9:16). “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom 9:18). Paul goes on to illustrate this with the image of the potter who has the right over the clay, to make different vessels for different uses. Of course, this does not mean that any potter would make a vessel merely to smash it to pieces.

The Canons of Dort are not speculative in light of the options present in their day. This shows particularly in the Synod's rejection of the Remonstrants' Molinist approach to election and in the fact that the Canons do so implicitly, without technical discussions. Luis de Molina's theory of middle knowledge works with three logical moments within the divine knowledge, the first two of which were uncontroversial in Reformed circles: (1) God's *necessary* knowledge, or knowledge of simple intelligence. This is God's knowledge of all necessary truths; it is prevolitional in the sense that God's will does not operate here. It is God's knowledge of all that must be, and of all that *could* be: it is knowledge of all possibilities. (2) God's *free* knowledge

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<sup>23</sup> Whichever position one takes in the debate, the impact of Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011) illustrates the open nerve in contemporary Christianity.

is his knowledge of what *will* be; it is entirely dependent upon God's active willing. (3) God's *middle* knowledge, between the first and the second knowledge. This is God's knowledge of all that *would* be, prior to any determination of the divine will.<sup>24</sup> By his middle knowledge, God knows what any person would do when placed in certain circumstances; thus, God can reckon with a person's inclinations in making his free decision. "Because God knows precisely how every individual would respond to any set of circumstances, God then actualizes a particular world with a particular set of individuals and set of circumstances in which they make free choices."<sup>25</sup> So, God acts with foreknowledge through conditioning. Against these sophisticated distinctions in God's will, the Synod sticks to a biblical rather than a philosophical argumentation.

In the following sections, more will be said about the Canons' use of the Bible. It is clear that a renewal of the understanding of election cannot do without a rereading of the Bible, not merely of the Canons of Dort. Besides, while it is to be valued that the Canons are not speculative in their set-up, the context and content of the discussion do influence the Canons. This leads to a consideration of the possible downsides of the Canons.

### III. *Limitations*

In retrospect and after four hundred years, there are also several aspects of the Canons of Dort that stand out as less favorable for present theological reflection. Four of these are highlighted here.

#### 1. *The Arminian Frame*

Since the Canons of Dort are a response document to the *Remonstrance*, they are defined by the Remonstrants' agenda. This limitation extends beyond the merely formal level of the awkward setup of chapters (i.e., chapter 3/4). The Remonstrants constantly and vehemently accused the Reformed of referring dying infants to hell, and of making God the author of sin. The Synod denied these points pastorally and with good arguments, but the playing field had been marked out by the Remonstrants with a focus on election and reprobation. This makes understandable, although not justified, both the later misunderstanding that predestination was a central dogma for the Reformed and pastoral misconceptions of the doctrine of

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<sup>24</sup> Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65–67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

predestination.<sup>26</sup> An alternative focus would have been possible: the doctrine of justification, the central tenet of the Reformation. In his 1608 declaration before the States of Holland, Gomarus had focused on Arminius's doctrine of justification. The Canons, however, say relatively little about it, because the *Remonstrance* did not address it.<sup>27</sup>

In short, Arminius's doctrine of justification as criticized by Gomarus is that "faith itself—not the righteousness of Christ—is imputed for righteousness to believers."<sup>28</sup> This view ascribes a much larger role to faith than the merely instrumental understanding of the Reformed tradition. Gomarus indicated a number of tensions in the writing of Arminius, particularly the tension between the thought that a believer is justified because of his faith and the idea that a believer is justified because of Christ's righteousness imputed to him.<sup>29</sup> Arminius and later Arminians insisted on the importance of human activity, which not only diverted the focus from God, who predestines in a sovereign way, but also shifts from the righteousness of Christ to the qualities of faith, understood as human activity. God and Christ are put into the background, human activity in the foreground. People would be justified because God sees human faith as "the whole righteousness of the law that we are held to accomplish."<sup>30</sup> Thus, the human act of obedience is our justification. Christ's justice and sacrifice merely make this procedure of justification possible, and faith becomes a human virtue.

The Arminian view of justification shows the same sort of deviation from Reformed theology as the Arminian view of predestination. The Canons of Dort, however, focus on the doctrine of election. This emphasis put the Synod on the defensive, leading to an emphatic denial in the Conclusion of the Canons "that this teaching makes God the author of sin, unjust, a tyrant, and a hypocrite." Had the Synod focused on justification, it would have taught the same doctrine while remaining closer the center of the gospel.

The Arminian frame was probably so compelling because the theme of human subjectivity was becoming increasingly important at the time. Notwithstanding the high level of scholastic, theological reasoning, the impression remains that the Canons illustrated the problem of modern subjectivity as much as they solved it.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Schweitzer, *Die protestantischen Centraldogmen in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der Reformirten Kirche* (Zurich: Orell, 1854), 1:xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Aza Goudriaan, "Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy," in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, ed. Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten, STAR 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 158–60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>30</sup> The Arminian Petrus Bertius, quoted via Goudriaan, "Justification by Faith," 164.

## 2. *Potentially Problematic Logic*

The Canons of Dort emphasize the unchangeable nature of God and, therefore, of his decree: “Election is God’s unchangeable purpose” (1.7); “Just as God is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled” (1.11; cf. 1.7; 5.7–8). God’s love for the elect is eternal, and the punishment for the reprobate is eternal (2.9; 1.15; cf. 1.12). God’s decree itself is eternal (1.6). The theological intent is clearly to emphasize the gratuity of God’s grace, its priority, and the fact that God finds reasons to love his people not in them but in himself. These are essential features of any Augustinian and Protestant understandings of grace.<sup>31</sup>

However, the logic at work here could become problematic because of a tendency toward reification of both the decree and of the sufficiency of grace. If the eternal decree is regarded in itself, it becomes a phenomenon between God and humans. Of course, this is not the intention of the Canons. As for grace, it is paradoxical that on the one hand the Canons of Dort advocate effective grace, which means that God has distinct persons in mind, and that grace is not a “thing,” no substance that has been prepared but the appropriation of which is left to the devices of humans; on the other hand, the distinction made in chapter 2 between the sufficiency of Christ’s death for everyone and its efficiency for the elect evokes a similar scheme to the one the Remonstrants employed, based on the distinction between possibility and reality. For the Remonstrants, the possibility of salvation had been fulfilled, while the reality through appropriation was a human responsibility. Some of the delegates shared Theodore Beza’s criticism of the sufficiency/efficiency distinction.<sup>32</sup> In the present-day perspective, the distinction raises questions about the use of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for those who doubt whether they belong to the elect. But even if these questions are solved, the logic implied in the notion of sufficiency is thing-like rather than personal.

Secondly, God’s eternity is understood primarily in terms of pretemporal causation. The *prae* of “predestination” receives more emphasis than the *destinatio*, and eternity is understood as prior to time, but also as distant from time. Of course, since eternity is not time, “prior” must be understood

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Martin Luther, “Heidelberger Disputation,” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), 1:354, 35–6: “Amor Dei non invenit, sed creat suum diligibile.”

<sup>32</sup> See Pieter L. Rouwendal, *Predestination and Preaching in Genevan Theology from Calvin to Pictet* (Kampen: Sumnum, 2017), 122–25 (on Beza’s position), 164–67, 179–81 (on the Synod of Dort).

in a logical, rather than a temporal sense. Also, there is a distinction between primary and secondary causes, and the notion of “cause” was not as impersonal in the early seventeenth century as it became later on. But the logic of causation raises the question as to how interaction between God and humans, for instance, in prayer, can take place.

While the Canons of Dort offer a sophisticated way to conceptualize the interplay between divine and human causation, and the logic was not intended to be impersonal at the time, alternative approaches are presently more viable. The tendency to reification can be countered by emphasizing that election is election *in Christ*. The causal language can be complemented by eschatological language, which should be primary. To think eschatologically means to direct the attention more to the end to which God calls humans (*destinatio*) than to the beginning (*prae*). The relation between time and eternity can be understood in a more dynamic way, in which eternity is not merely, or primarily, pretemporal. Instead of abstract “eternity,” it is useful to think of the eternal God, who is not only pretemporal but who reigns over all times, which are present to him. This means that the eternal decree is not placed at a distance, but very near: “God’s eternal decisions are made at the very last moment.”<sup>33</sup> This means that God hears our prayers exactly because he is the eternal God, who is not locked up in an eternity *outside* time, but who reigns *over* time. This approach safeguards the priority and effectiveness of God’s grace, while stripping it of overly impersonal aspects and unnecessarily perceived distances, since God has come near in his love.

The key to a solution lies in not taking an abstract balance of “power” approach: neither the balance of power between God and humans, nor the inherent power of Christ’s sacrifice (although the Canons are right here), but the love of God, which he shows now, in the present time, through the preaching of the gospel.

### 3. Election in the Bible

Some central biblical aspects of election can illustrate the importance and the limitations of the Canons of Dort for the present time.

(1) The main line of God’s sovereignty advocated by the Canons is more in line with biblical teaching than the Remonstrant insistence on human freedom. Particularly in the often-quoted passage Romans 9–11, Paul uses some harsh paradoxes to underline God’s sovereignty. However, this is not all that is found in Romans 9–11. Paul also marvels at God’s wisdom and

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<sup>33</sup> Oepke Noordmans, *Het Koninkrijk der hemelen: Toelichting op de Heidelbergse catechismus zondag 7–22* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1949), 110.

bursts into a doxology when highlighting what God has done through his mission work among the Gentiles.<sup>34</sup> This aspect is a key to understanding God's election. When discussed in general, abstracted from concrete people, predestination may seem cold and fate-like. But *in concreto* predestination is another word for the love of God for his unworthy people. The Canons of Dort show the doxological and soteriological sides of predestination but are not free of abstract discussions of predestination, for example, in passages that bluntly refer to "some people."

(2) The neglect of Israel is an important reason why the Canons run the risk of abstraction. It would be unhistorical to blame the Synod for this, but the absence of discussion of Israel strikes the present reader. For election in the Old Testament primarily comes in the form of God's election of Israel.<sup>35</sup> Also, Israel is center stage in Romans 9–11. Paul starts with his sorrow over Israel (9:1–5), discusses God's election of Abraham's children (9:6–13), leading to the central theme of Israel's unbelief (9:30–33) and the engrafting of Gentiles in Israel (11). The Canons of Dort miss this point.

(3) In the Bible, election has a corporate aspect. Even in Romans 9, where Paul states that Jacob was chosen while Esau was not, the election of Israel as a people is implied. First Peter 2:9 describes the New Testament church as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." While the accent on Israel was virtually unknown in the seventeenth century, this corporate aspect of predestination was already present in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), in which election is an aspect of the church.<sup>36</sup> The Canons of Dort, however, focus on the individual.

(4) The Canons of Dort emphasize the priority and the efficacy of grace, that is, God's initiative and sovereignty in grace. There are other possible characteristics of grace (e.g., its superabundance, singularity, noncircularity, and incongruity). The incongruity of grace in particular seems more important for the apostle Paul's theology than the priority of efficacy: since the receivers of God's grace are unworthy of such a gift, its incongruity dissolves former criteria of worth and opens up a new reality.<sup>37</sup>

(5) The New Testament authors emphasize the eschatological reality more than protology or pretemporal eternity.<sup>38</sup> The New Testament is full

<sup>34</sup> Rom 11:33–36.

<sup>35</sup> See Deut 7:6–8, which may suffice for a vast number of texts.

<sup>36</sup> Heidelberg Catechism 52, 54. <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>.

<sup>37</sup> John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 70–75, 569. One does not have to share Barclay's solution of incongruous grace to accept that the priority of grace is not Paul's prime concern.

<sup>38</sup> Even when eternity as pretemporal reality is emphasized, this is clothed in the eschatological language of Christ's coming (e.g., Eph 1:3–10).

of predestination, in the sense that the kingdom of God breaks forth: God chooses what is weak, low, despised, “things that are not,”<sup>39</sup> to end human boasting and to glorify himself. This emphasis is present not merely in Paul’s letters but also in the Gospels. God in Christ clearly prefers the humble and weak. Jesus transcends the level of moral intuition by preferring whores and sinners of every kind over the neat Pharisees, and the socially lower Lazarus over the rich man. God sympathizes with those in need of conversion; that is predestination in the Gospels. This perspective colors the understanding of election as eternal and pretemporal: believers see in retrospect that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world.”<sup>40</sup> No starting point for God’s love can be found in time, because God’s love dates all the way back from before the foundation of the world. In this way, predestination again becomes part of doxology. This can happen only through Christ, since election in the Bible is election “in Christ.”

#### 4. *Christ the Center*

Last but not least, the place of Christ in the Canons of Dort is an important point. The relation between election and Christ in the Canons of Dort has been much debated. Chapter 1 states that “God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people.... 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” (1.7). According to Karl Barth and others, the relation between God’s decree and his salvific acts in Christ is not clarified, and predestination remains abstract, remote from Christ.<sup>41</sup> The Remonstrants interpreted this passage likewise and criticized that Christ only matters in the effectuation of election, but not in election itself. The Remonstrants themselves preferred to call Christ “the foundation of election” (*fundamentum electionis*), whereas the Synod calls him “the foundation of salvation” (*fundamentum salutis*, 1.7). Others, however, interpret that the decree and Christ are inherently connected and that the Canons are more Christ centered than the Remonstrants and Karl Barth thought.<sup>42</sup> The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle between the nonchristological and explicitly christological interpretations of these passages. A counter indication for the strong christological interpretation is the fact that Christ has not yet been mentioned by section 6 of chapter 1.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Cor 1:28.

<sup>40</sup> Eph 1:4.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II/2 (Zurich: EVZ, 1959), 118–22 = *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, *Divine Election: Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), ch. 5.

Also, it is clear that the Synod wanted to avoid the formula *fundamentum electionis* for Christ, because the Remonstrants used this expression to denote that faith in Christ was prior to election, and that election was based on faith. That would be anthropocentrism instead of christocentrism.<sup>43</sup>

Be this as it may, this discussion centers on Christ as figure in God's eternal election, rather than the incarnate, concrete Christ, and the proclaimed Christ of Christian preaching. The concrete character of predestination as relation to Christ could have been more strongly articulated. This wish does not merely stem from later, more christocentric, times. Compare Calvin's famous statement, for instance, that Christ "is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election."<sup>44</sup> This statement takes seriously that predestination can only be known afterward, a posteriori, in Christ. Not merely on the personal level of assurance, but also in theological reflection, predestination is a complete mystery outside Christ. In Christ, however, it shows that election is another word for love and that God loved his elect from before the foundation of the world.

The pastoral thrust and the theology of the Canons could have been stronger if Christ as mirror of election had been more central. The pastoral problems arising from an eternal, unchangeable, but unknown decision taken regarding a person can be enormous. The Synod was aware of these pastoral aspects and approached them in a sophisticated way, but a stronger focus on Christ could have countered these problems even better. Predestination is not about a reality far off, but about Christ, who is near.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The Next Four Hundred Years**

How can the legacy of the Canons remain a vital part of the Reformed heritage for the next four hundred years?

Firstly, it is crucial for any Reformed tradition that God be God, and that the doctrine of God not be humanized. We cannot fathom the depths of God. This is no excuse for lazy thinking; what is needed is a humble expression of our limitedness. Secondly, humans are not as rational as proponents of human autonomy would have them be. Rather, humans are often driven by irrational stimuli. Reason is no less sinful than the rest of human make-up, and the will is completely unwilling. Thirdly, God shows a preference for

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius and the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603–1609*, Brill's Series in Church History 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 227–31, on Arminius's reasons to call Christ *fundamentum electionis*.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.24.5.

those who are not preferable to the human eye. Most importantly, God's grace is by its very nature effective, because the Triune God is at work.

After four hundred years, there are mainly two *desiderata*. Firstly, to think biblically is to think eschatologically, even about eternity. Only God is truly eternal: for him, all times are present. Thus, in our perspective, God takes his eternal decisions at the very last moment. God's eternity does not lock him up *outside* time, but since it is *God's* eternity, he truly reigns over all times. As such, he is unchangeable in his love. Secondly, the eternal God has revealed himself in the man Jesus Christ. He is God's election in action and the mirror of our election. Wherever Christ is proclaimed, the eternal God is at work. Under the proclamation of the gospel eternal decisions take place, at the very last moment. Thirdly, predestination must be understood as the Triune God in action, who is effective in his love and unfailing in his salvation. Ultimately, the mystery of predestination is the mystery of Trinity.

Meanwhile, that other mystery remains: How can it be that God lets some of his creatures remain in their misery? That was a mystery for Paul, and it will remain a mystery until the final day.