Election: The Father's Decision to Adopt

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Abstract

The doctrine of election presents us with an intellectual challenge. The Synod of Dort maintained that, based on his sovereign good pleasure, God decided to choose some for salvation and punish others with condemnation. This truth often leaves the impression that God acted in an arbitrary or even unjust manner. The Canons of Dort, though, present the electing God as a merciful Father and frame election within the language of adoption. As the Canons shape this doctrine in this way, they help God's people understand it better, even though certain questions will remain. This article combines doctrinal analysis and parabolic storytelling to highlight the particular strengths of the Canons' treatment of this challenging doctrine.

Teaching doctrine effectively is a challenge. The truth of God's Word must be summarized faithfully, lucidly, and succinctly, but also in a way that relates to people in their daily lives. Jesus Christ, as our chief prophet and teacher,[1] was masterful at this. He explained the central teachings of Scripture using some of the shortest, most memorable, and most accessible stories ever told. For instance, he instructed us about the kingdom of heaven by telling us about a farmer whose fields were contaminated by an enemy who sows weed seed

[1] Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12.

(Matt 13:24–30). Who would have ever guessed it? On another occasion, he clarified the proper way of judging others, or refraining from doing so, by talking about a man who had a full-sized plank stuck in his eye (Luke 6:39–41). Who could ever forget it?

Now far be it from anyone, including the present author, to claim the ability to teach like our Lord Jesus Christ, who stunned the crowds with his pedagogical expertise (Matt 7:28–29). Nevertheless, we can still learn something from him, and in this case, it is the power of story, or narrative, in driving home the truths of the gospel. Regrettably, the two are rarely combined. Either we are teaching doctrine or we are telling a story, but as Michael King once commented, "Never the twain seemed to meet—the doctrines of the church and the stories that excited me."[2] In this essay, we will attempt to take his "never" and turn it into a "sometimes."

Careful definition and forthright correction are vitally important for the church. This year we are reminded of this in a particular way as we commemorate the quadricentennial of the Synod of Dort, convened on November 13, 1618, and closed on May 9, 1619. Concerning intricate doctrines such as election and the extent of the atonement, the Canons of Dort define key terms and refute subtle heresies in a manner that might be considered unparalleled. Such precision ought to be celebrated, not eschewed as theological nitpicking. At the same time, if definition has its place in the pedagogical process, so does story. In what follows, as we explore the doctrine of election from the perspective of the Father's adopting love, we will endeavor to combine the respective strengths of both definition and storytelling.

I. *A Doctrinal Parable*

Let us imagine. There once was a king—a kind, wise, and faithful king. This king also had a son—a kind, wise, and faithful son. In every way, this son was the apple of his father's royal eye. Already for years this father and son had been working together to rule over their kingdom, the kingdom of Mundus. The population of their kingdom was forty million people.

One day, with the full cooperation of his son, the king issued a royal decree. He gave an extraordinary gift to five million citizens in his kingdom. Each of them received a beautiful house and a guaranteed annual income of one million dollars for the rest of his life. These five million citizens were astonished and overjoyed.

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[2] Michael A. King, "Flesh on Dry Bones: Combining Doctrine and Story," *Conrad Grebel Review* 11.1 (1993): 38–39.

However, there was another part to this decree. The other thirty-five million citizens were stripped of whatever earthly wealth they had, thrown into prison, and subjected to hard labor for the rest of their lives. These thirty-five million citizens were shocked and filled with fury.

II. *The Issue Narrowed*

Let us briefly evaluate this story. On the one hand, a king is a king. He is sovereign and has the right to do as he wants with his kingdom. On the other hand, as we think about this particular royal decree, something bothers us. Our sense of justice compels us to ask, "Is this fair? Is this right? It seems so arbitrary. How could the king possibly justify his action?" Deep inside we may quietly wonder: Is this king *really* so kind and wise?

Now let's connect this story to the doctrine. There is a parallel between this imaginary story about Mundus and the doctrine of election. Of course, there are big differences, too. Election includes spiritual and eternal blessings, not beautiful houses and guaranteed incomes. Conversely, reprobation includes hellish agony, which is far worse even than a lifetime of hard labor. At the same time, even though there are certainly places where this analogy breaks down, is not there a line of similarity as well? In his eternal decree, the King of the universe has decided to grant some people salvation while punishing others with condemnation. Moreover, the decision as to *who* receives *what* rests entirely in God's sovereign good pleasure. This is what the first chapter of the Canons of Dort makes abundantly clear. But this is also what we sometimes question. Our deep-seated sense of justice compels us to ask, "How can this possibly be right? It seems so arbitrary, so unfair."

So this is the key question: since our merciful God is also perfectly *just*, how can he simply and sovereignly choose some for eternal bliss while sending others to eternal anguish? In fact, this same question occupied the mind of Jacob Arminius as well. Even though the name of Arminius is usually associated with asserting the significance of the human free will, actually his primary concern was trying to find a way to square God's sovereign election with God's impeccable justice.[3] Like us, Arminius and his disciples wanted to know how God could ordain some to heaven and others to hell, purely on the basis of his sovereign good pleasure, and remain just

[3] "With the doctrine of God and the justice of God, we enter the heart and foundation of Arminius's theology." See William den Boer, "Defense or Deviation? A Re-Examination of Arminius's Motives to Deviate from the 'Mainstream' Reformed Theology," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt, 1618–1619*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred A. van Lieburg, Brill's Series in Church History 49 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 28.

and right in all he does (Dan 4:37). We are going to look for an answer to that pressing question by focusing on the fact that our God is not only an eternal King but also the heavenly *Father*. Also, by taking a closer look at the text of the Canons of Dort, we hope to see that God's sovereignty is not only infinitely powerful but also extraordinarily *paternal*.

III. *A Necessary Foundation*

Before we delve into all of this, though, we need to lay down two fundamental points. The first point is that there is a significant flaw in the story that I told. At least if we are going to compare it to election, then it must be perfectly clear that the citizens in the kingdom of Mundus are not neutral, more or less decent folk. No, in fact, they are all a bunch of hatred-filled rebels who do whatever they can to ignore and transgress their king's commands, despite all his good and faithful care of them.

The Canons of Dort remind us of this fundamental truth, confessed by the church throughout the ages,[4] and they do so repeatedly. Each chapter of the Canons begins with some sort of confession of sin. A quick glance through the titles of the early articles in each chapter confirms this: "All Mankind Condemnable Before God" (1.1), "The Punishment Which God's Justice Requires" (2.1), "The Effect of the Fall" and "The Spread of Corruption" (3/4.1 and 3/4.2), and "The Regenerate Not Free from Indwelling Sin" and "Daily Sins of Weakness" (5.1 and 5.2).[5] The truth should be clear: if we do not start in our minds with the vileness of our own human sinfulness, then we will, almost inevitably, get this doctrine wrong. Understanding the lofty subject of divine election requires, before all else, a lowly attitude of humility. The last article of the first chapter of the Canons reinforces this point when it calls for "reverent adoration of these mysteries" rather than haughty protest against them (1.18).

In fact, it is perhaps telling that in some of their key documents the Remonstrants[6] regularly chose to start with God's eternal decree rather

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[4] W. Robert Godfrey makes the interesting point that "the first article of each Head of Doctrine states an undoubtedly catholic truth … [to] which Roman Catholics, Lutherans and the Reformed would all agree." See W. Robert Godfrey, "Popular and Catholic: The *Modus Docendi* of the Canons of Dordt," in Goudriaan and van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt, 1618–1619*, 258.

[5] All quotations from the Canons of Dort in this essay are taken from the translation adopted by the Canadian Reformed Churches as it is published in the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2014). This translation can also be found online: http://canrc.org/?page=32.

[6] *Remonstrants* is a more helpful designation for this group than *Arminians*. Jacobus

than man's original sin. The *Remonstrance* (1610) begins immediately by stating that "God by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save …."[7] Similarly, the first and last sections of the Remonstrants' *Sententiae* (1618) both begin with the "decree."[8] To be sure, the Remonstrants include the concept of God electing certain individuals from the midst of fallen humankind,[9] but unlike the Canons they do not *start* with that concept.[10] And my story, I must admit, also introduces the decree almost straight away. That is not helpful, so later on I will retell my story and bring it more in line with the order of thought presented in the Canons of Dort.

The second basic point is that what applies to earthly kings does not necessarily apply to the heavenly king, our God. For example, we assume that earthly kings should still be subject to the rule of law. Indeed, in the book of Deuteronomy, we read that each king of Israel was supposed to have a copy of God's law right there with him, and he had to "read in it all the days of his life" (Deut 17:19). Broadening our scope of inquiry for a moment, the history of this world has known enough dictators and demagogues who have taken a different approach and ruled with the iron fist of *rex lex*—that is, the king *is* the law, and as a result, he can do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants. But since the human nature is corrupt, when earthly kings rule by the principle of *rex lex*, they quickly become arbitrary tyrants. Therefore, rather than *rex lex*, our society strongly endorses a policy of *rex sub lege*, that is, the earthly king (or president or prime minister) *under* the law.

For this reason, we are tempted to do the same with our heavenly King. We take law, or more generally a sense of justice, and we place God under it. However, there is a significant problem here. In effect, we take something—a sense of justice, perhaps even *our own* sense of justice—and we elevate it above God himself. Of course, we would never say it in quite that way, but in reality, that *is* what we often do. Moreover, to do so is to transgress the

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Arminius himself died in 1609, one year before the *Remonstrance* (1610) was written and a full decade before the Synod of Dort was convened.

[7] Peter Y. De Jong, ed., *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 208.

[8] See sections A.1 and D.1 of the *Sententiae* as quoted in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 222, 228.

[9] See sections A.3–4 of the *Sententiae* as quoted in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 222–23.

[10] In choosing to start the first chapter concerning election with human sin rather than divine decree, the Synod of Dort was following a submission from the Palatinate delegation called the *Modus docendi populariter doctrinam de Predestinatione*. For more detail, see Godfrey, "Popular and Catholic: The *Modus Docendi* of the Canons of Dordt," 246–53.

first commandment, even if unwittingly. To make anything, even our sense of justice, *higher* than God is to make another god.[11] And that is something we must never do.

At this point, though, a concern arises. If God is not under the law, is it possible that in his royal sovereignty he would act in an unfair or unjust way? No, that is impossible because, as the first article of the Belgic Confession reminds us, God is "a *simple* and spiritual being." God's simplicity means that we cannot divide, nor even begin to tug apart, the attributes of our God. He is always everything that he is—entirely, unfailingly, and *cohesively*. To put it in other terms, every decision that God makes is incomprehensibly, immutably, wisely, mercifully, purely, faithfully, and justly made. Justice, therefore, does not need to be *over* God, since it is integrally and unalterably *part* of who he is. Since God cannot stop being God (2 Tim 2:13), he also cannot stop being just—not even for a moment and certainly not for an eternal decree.

Our latent fear that somehow God may have been unjust in his decree of election and reprobation needs to be answered by a robust understanding of theology per se, that is, the doctrine of God, both in his attributes but also in his essence. More to the point, to teach the doctrine of election faithfully and effectively we need to pay particular attention to God's Triune majesty. For our present purposes, most of our attention will be on God the Father and his only-begotten Son, but a similar analysis could, and probably should, be made concerning the participation of the Holy Spirit in the eternal decree. Simply put, though, God's decree of election is, to its very core, a thoroughly *paternal* decree. The very fiber of eternal election is woven together with his fatherly care.

IV. *Election Defined … Paternally*

Below is the Synod of Dort's definition of election, as found in Chapter 1, Article 7.

> Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and perdition, He has, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons, neither better nor more worthy than others, but involved together with them in a common misery. He has also from eternity appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation and

[11] G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 54–57.

> thus He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into His communion through His Word and Spirit. He decreed to give them true faith in Him, to justify them, to sanctify them, and, after having powerfully kept them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them, for the demonstration of His mercy and the praise of the riches of His glorious grace. As it is written: *God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves* (Eph 1:4–6). And elsewhere, *those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified* (Rom 8:30).

As the italics indicate, this definition is explicitly grounded in two passages, Ephesians 1:4–6 and Romans 8:30. Moreover, in Ephesians 1 the Holy Spirit makes a direct connection between election and adoption: "He [that is, God the Father] predestined us *for adoption as sons* through Jesus Christ." The second passage, Romans 8:30, does not mention adoption in that specific verse, but the concept is certainly there in the context:

- Romans 8:12–16 is about the Spirit of adoption.
- Romans 8:18–25 speaks about waiting eagerly for "adoption as sons."
- Romans 8:29 describes Christ, the Son of God, as "the firstborn among many brothers."

The simple but significant point is this: the Canons *anchor* the definition of election in passages that highlight adoption.[12] Adoption, by the very definition of the word itself, involves a *father* and his *children*.

But there is more. Once again, the Synod's definition of election is found below, only this time the italic print highlights words or phrases that correspond closely to a verse, or verses, in Ephesians 1. The corresponding verses of Ephesians 1 are indicated in parentheses.

> Election is the unchangeable *purpose of God* (v. 5) whereby, *before the foundation of the world* (v. 4), out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and perdition, He has, according to the sovereign *good pleasure of His will* (v. 5), out of mere *grace, chosen in Christ* (v. 4) to salvation a definite number of specific persons, neither better nor more worthy than others, but involved together with them in a common misery. He has also from eternity

[12] See further Jason Van Vliet, *Children of God: The Imago Dei in John Calvin and His Context* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 77. "It is essential to take note of [Calvin's] earlier commentary on Rom 8:17 in which he adduces that the Apostle Paul 'proves that our salvation consists in having God as our Father.' It is remarkable that Calvin opts for the term 'consists' rather than, for instance, 'includes.'"

> appointed Christ to be the Mediator and *Head of all the elect* (vv. 22–23) and the foundation of salvation and thus He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into His communion through *His Word and Spirit* (v. 13). He decreed to give them true faith in Him, to justify them, *to sanctify them* (v. 4), and, after having powerfully kept them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them, for the demonstration of His mercy and *the praise of the riches of His glorious grace* (vv. 6, 7, 12).

As a confessional summary, Article 7 of the first chapter of the Canons pulls together various passages of Scripture. This is exactly what we would expect. Yet what is striking is how much the delegates at Dort drew from Ephesians 1—there are at least eight close verbal parallels.

This is all the more remarkable because the longest continuous section of the Bible on the doctrine of election is Romans 9–11. Nevertheless, in shaping up the definition of election, the delegates at Dort reached time and again for the language of Ephesians 1, the very chapter that describes election *as adoption*. Furthermore, when they did reference Romans, they mostly went to Romans 8, which also deals with adoption. Evidently, the two grounding passages at the end of the article have strongly influenced the wording of the entire article. The conclusion should be clear: the Canons of Dort want us to think about election in terms of adoption.[13] Yes, there is pastoral language here, but it is pastoral language with *paternal* shaping.[14]

This can even be taken a step further. Looking beyond the definition in Chapter 1 Article 7 and into the other sections of the Canons, these themes of God the Father, election as adoption, and the chosen as children keep coming back. Here is a representative list:

1. Out of the common mass of sinners God "adopted certain persons to be his own possession" (1.10).
2. Over time the elect will recognize within themselves a "childlike fear of God" (1.12).
3. We should accept our heavenly Father's teaching like "little children" (Rejection of Errors [RE], 1.8).
4. The Father who elects us shines his "fatherly face" upon the repentant (5.5).

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[13] This emphasis already began in the *Counter-Remonstrance* (1611), where we read that "children of wrath" are chosen as "God's elect children" (1, 2) and that God "bestowed on them … the Spirit of adoption as God's children which they had once received" (6). See De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 211–12.

[14] See Edwin H. Palmer, "The Significance of the Canons for Pastoral Work," in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 137–49.

5. The Father will not let his chosen ones fall away entirely from "the grace of adoption" (5.6).
6. The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that "we are children and heirs of God" (5.10).
7. God, who is "the Father of all comfort" (5.11), will not let us be tempted beyond our strength.
8. We should also be careful to avoid all "abuse of [God's] fatherly goodness" (5.13).

By contrast, the Remonstrants did not shape their explanation of election using the language of adoption. Below are two definitions, or descriptions, of election that they produced:

> That God by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen sinful human race those in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ who by the grace of the Holy Spirit shall believe in this his Son Jesus Christ and persevere in this faith and obedience of faith to the end … according to the word of the holy gospel in John 3:36, "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life, and whosoever is disobedient to the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him (*Remonstrance* 1610).[15]

> God has ordained that Christ should be a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and by virtue of that decree He has determined to justify and to save those who believe in Him, and to provide for men means necessary and sufficient for faith in such a way as He knows to be in harmony with His wisdom and justice (*Sententiae* 1618).[16]

These definitions contain the Remonstrants' trademark teaching of election on the basis of foreseen faith, but they do not include any reference to adoption, or God as Father, or the chosen as God's children. Indeed, scanning through both of these documents in their entirety, the reader discovers that the only time they use the language of children is when they discuss the matter of the election of believers' children.

Of course, someone may object that this is little more than an argument from silence. Granted. Yet perhaps this inaudible argument gains at least a little bit of volume when we take note of how often the Remonstrants reject, explicitly and vigorously, any notion of God's *absolute* decree.[17] Why did they reject God's absolute decree so vigorously? For them, tucked inside the word "absolute" was the idea that God is an Absolute Power that

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[15] As quoted in ibid., 208.

[16] As quoted in ibid., 223.

[17] A rejection of an absolute decree can be found in the *Sententiae* A.1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10; B.1; C.6; D.1; De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 221–29.

arbitrarily, and perhaps even dispassionately, sent some people to heaven and the rest to hell.[18] The Remonstrants could not accept, let alone trust, a God who acts in such a cold and arbitrary way. Therefore, they rejected this notion forcefully and irrevocably.

Regrettably, the Remonstrants made the mistake of thinking that this was the way in which the Reformed wanted to portray God.[19] In fact, the conclusion to the Canons expressly states that the Reformed reject the idea that "God has predestined and created the greatest part of the world for eternal damnation *by a mere arbitrary act of his will*, without taking into account any sin." Thus, from the opening chapter to the concluding paragraphs, the Canons of Dort portray God with warmth—paternal, patient, compassionate, and grace-filled warmth. Is this God completely sovereign? Yes. Is he, therefore, also coldly absolute or callously arbitrary? No, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, it is highly ironic that due to the absence of this paternal language in their *Remonstrance* and *Sententiae*, the Remonstrants inadvertently portray God in a colder, more dispassionate manner than do the Reformed!

V. *A Doctrinal Parable Retold*

Earlier I promised to rework my story to bring it more in line with the Canons of Dort. Now is the right time to do so.

There once was a king—a kind, wise, and faithful king. This king also had a son—a kind, wise, and faithful son. Together they ruled justly over the kingdom of Mundus, which had a population of forty million citizens.

Sadly and shockingly, the citizens of this kingdom neither acknowledged nor appreciated the kindness and wisdom of their king. In fact, they transgressed his laws constantly. They even hated their king with an ingrained bitterness—every single one of them. They struck an alliance with a corrupt and callous prince from another kingdom. With this evil prince and his army of thugs, the rebellious citizens of Mundus repeatedly attacked their king, his son, and the castle in which they lived. And, the reader should be

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[18] One thing that merits more research is whether the Remonstrant aversion to the *absolute* decree of God is in fact, or least in part, a reaction against certain aspects of the scholastic notion of *potentia absoluta*. In this regard see Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 56–64.

[19] It is possible that the Remonstrants received this impression from some of the more strenuous supralapsarian strands within the Reformed church. For more on the history of supralapsarianism within the Reformed tradition, see Lynne Courter Boughton, "Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in 16th Century Reformed Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48.1 (1986): 63–96.

aware, in the kingdom of Mundus rebellion against the king was a capital offense, punishable by death.

One day, during this rebellion, the king came to his son with a plan. "My son," said the king, "I've decided to adopt, as my very own children and heirs, some of these rebellious citizens of mine—five million of them to be precise." The king continued, "My plan is to forgive these five million, entirely and completely, for their rebellion. More than that, they will be fully, lovingly, and legally adopted into my royal household. I will take care of them generously for the rest of their lives, and I will transform their hate-filled hearts with my royal love and mercy. And, since my heart overflows with love, I will ensure that they even share in the royal inheritance that I have set aside for you, my natural, firstborn son."

What a gracious plan! Now, contrary to what you might expect, the son did *not* react to his father's plan with dismay. After all, your average earthly prince would be horrified at the idea of adopting a bunch of ungrateful rebels into the royal household, especially if it means sharing his inheritance with them. But not so for this prince. Filled as he was with his father's kindness and wisdom, this son agreed enthusiastically with the plan.

However, he did have one concern. "Father," the son said, "You have always been a merciful king but also a just king. Your own law requires that rebels be punished with death, but now—it would seem at least—five million of them are going to get off scot-free. How does that fit with your sense of justice?" The father answered, "Yes, my son, I have thought of that. As part of my plan I am asking you, my much-beloved, royal son, to take the punishment of death instead of those rebels. Surely *your* death is worth more to me than that of many soldiers and citizens. *Your* death, in their place, will satisfy my justice."

Again, contrary to what you might expect, the son neither rejected nor resented his father's plan. Instead, he completely trusted his father's love and wisdom. Firmly yet willingly, the son replied, "Yes father, I will do it. Your plan is both exceedingly gracious and entirely just."

So it was decided. The decree was issued. The son took the punishment of the rebels and died in their place. The father adopted the chosen rebels into his household—fully, legally, and lovingly. All five million of them lived under his fatherly care and protection, and they learned to love him instead of loathing him.

But one day, one of the five million, a young man named Curiosus, was walking pensively through the royal gardens. Various questions swirled through his mind, "Why did my father only adopt five million of us? Wouldn't it be more fair and just if he adopted all forty million citizens of

Mundus? And, since the death of the king's natural son was so precious to him, why did he not make that substitute death of his son count for all forty million citizens? Then, whether they made good use of it or not, at least everyone had an equal opportunity, and no one could ever accuse him of unfairness." He wandered, and he wondered ….

VI. *Good Questions Answered*

Let us take another look at this story. To be sure, the analogy between my story and the doctrine of election still breaks down at certain points.[20] That is the weakness of every analogy. But perhaps this analogy can help us answer Curiosus's first question, which is a question many of us have: Why did not God just elect everyone? The following points merit consideration:

1. If we are to speak of justice, then injustice and unfairness are clearly on our side, as human beings, not on God's side. *We* are the rebels who daily offend God and trample over his laws.
2. The heavenly Father took the inexpressibly great step of sending his very own Son to bear the full burden of his eternal wrath against sin. Why? He did this precisely to maintain his justice as he chose to adopt some fallen human beings as his children. So for us humans to turn around now and suggest that the Father is being *unjust* in his decree of predestination is the height of imprudence. The well-known words of the apostle Paul should be ringing in our ears: "Who are you, a man?" (Rom 9:20). God's election *in Christ his Son* establishes his justice; it does not undermine it.
3. The eternal Father is neither legally nor morally obliged to adopt any sinful human being. This is all the more true considering that he already has an eternal, natural Son with whom he is very well pleased (Matt 3:17). Added to that, the potential adoptees are not innocent orphans but children of wrath (Eph 2:3), hardened rebels, who in their natural hearts hate this very same eternal Father.[21]
4. Even among earthly parents, the decision of *whether* to adopt and *how many* children to adopt is respectfully left with the parents. It is not for

[20] For example, my doctrinal parable is told entirely within the normal chronological parameters of time. However, with God's eternal decree we must deal with the intersection of time and eternity. This significant question is outside the scope of this article. Interesting reading can be found in Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 144–70.

[21] Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 2.

others to come along and suggest, let alone demand, that for the sake of justice they should adopt more children. If we afford each other that respect as human beings, how much more should human beings do the same toward the Most High God. The decision of whether and how many to adopt is *his*—entirely and emphatically so.

5. When earthly parents adopt orphans, our collective response is one of appreciation. "What kind and generous people!" we exclaim. How much more should we not praise the heavenly Father who has adopted rebels?[22]

Returning to Curiosus, though, he had another, related question running through his mind as he was wandering through the royal garden. By way of reminder, he asked, "Why didn't the king make the substitute death of his son count for all forty million citizens, and then leave it up to them as to whether they made good use of it or not?" This would have pre-empted any charge of unfairness on God's part. By now it may well be obvious that Curiosus had more than mere questions swirling around in his cerebrum; he also had some Remonstrant theology in the mix of his contemplations. To be more precise, this is how the Remonstrants put it:

> Though Christ has merited reconciliation with God and remission of sins for all men and for every man, yet no one, according to the pact of the new and gracious covenant, becomes a true partaker of the benefits obtained by the death of Christ in any way other than by faith.[23]

At first glance, it may seem like Curiosus and the Remonstrants have a point. Equal opportunity sounds fair and just. Beyond that, salvation is by faith, isn't it? But this approach needs to be probed more deeply. First of all, in God's plan, salvation includes both pardon *and adoption*.[24] Logically speaking, why would any of these rebels avail themselves of the opportunity to be adopted into God's royal household? Theoretically, they might want to grab a quick, legal pardon from riches of God's mercy, but becoming one of his children is another matter entirely. They naturally hate him. Why would they want to join his household? Sometimes we give human traitors credit where credit is *not* due!

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[22] Canons of Dort 1.18.

[23] *Sententiae* B.3 as quoted in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 224–25.

[24] Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 5, 12 indicates this when it describes our deliverance not only as an escape from punishment but also renewed reception into God's favor. See also footnote 12 in this essay concerning how John Calvin defines salvation as adoption.

In addition, it is worth our while to take a careful look at what the Canons of Dort say about the extent of Christ's atoning work. Of course, in the second chapter of the Canons we encounter the well-known distinction between the sufficiency and the efficacy of Christ's death. As the Son of God, his death is "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole word" (2.3), but we also confess that it was "was the most free counsel of *God the Father*, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the *most precious death of his Son* should extend to all the elect" (2.8; emphasis added). Notice how at the precise moment that the Canons begin to speak of the efficacy of Christ's death, some familiar language returns: Father–Son language! What is more, this same kind of language returns no less than four times in the Rejection of Errors in Chapter 2.[25] This cannot be a mere coincidence. Instead, the delegates at Dort purposefully contoured their explanation of Christ's atonement in Chapter 2 with the same kind of language they used in Chapter 1 about election: paternal, and ultimately pastoral, language.

This kind of language is more than semantics. It makes a substantive difference. All too often when we think about the extent of Christ's atoning death, we look at it from a human point of view, immediately latching onto some concept of "equal opportunity for salvation." That just sounds fair. However, what happens if we look at it again from the point of view of the eternal Father and his beloved Son? Imagine that the Father had asked his precious Son to offer himself up to an unimaginably horrible death, all in order to generate an opportunity for human rebels to step forward, if they so desired, and be adopted by the eternal Father. There was no guarantee that they would actually do so. In fact, the chances are nonexistent that they will. So, in the end, the Father would ask his beloved Son to die an inexpressibly agonizing death … for nothing. Is that fair and just *toward the Son*? Not at all.

Turning it around, as the Canons do in the third rejection of error of the second chapter,[26] what can we say about the Son's action toward the Father?

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[25] RE 1: "*God the Father* has ordained *His Son* to the death of the cross without a specific and definite decree to save any"; RE 2: "but only that He should acquire for *the Father* the mere right to establish once more with man such a covenant as He might please"; RE 3: "He acquired for *the Father* only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man"; RE 4: "The new covenant of grace which *God the Father,* through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man."

[26] The error rejected reads as follows: "By his satisfaction Christ did not really merit for anyone either salvation itself or faith by which this satisfaction of Christ to salvation is effectually made one's own. He acquired for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as he might desire. It depends, however, on the free will of man to fulfil these conditions. Therefore, it was possible that either no one or all men would fulfil them."

For argument's sake, what if the Son agreed to die on the cross to gain for the Father the right to once again deal with the sinful rebels but nothing more than that. In other words, what if the Son gains for the Father the *opportunity* to adopt but not the *reality* of adoption. Is that fair and just *toward the Father*? Would the Son then be doing justice to *the Father's sovereignty*? Moreover, is it right and fair for the Father's desire to adopt to be held captive to the corrupt desires of a mob of sinful rebels? Again, the words of the apostle Paul ring in our ears: who is the Potter and who is the clay (Rom 9:21)?

And what of God's grace? Would the Son be doing justice to his own Father's overflowing grace if he died for an opportunity that never comes to fruition? That would leave the horribly mistaken impression that the Father's grace is both feeble and unfruitful, and that would not be doing justice to the true character of *the Father's grace*.

God is just. Surely all can agree with that truth. However, in the very first place then, the Father and the Son are just *within* the Triune Godhead. The Father is always just *toward his own Son,* and the Son is always just *toward his own eternal Father*. This intra-Trinitarian justice is of the highest priority. Being the self-centered human beings that we are, we often forget this fundamental truth, also when our minds wander and wonder about the doctrine of election.

In this way Curiosus's questions are answered. No, they are not resolved to the full satisfaction of every intellectual angle and inquiry that our fertile minds can generate. There does come a point where our theological curiosity has to stop, lest we find ourselves transgressing the boundaries of Scripture and inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High.[27] Truth be told, the notion that Christ's atoning death gives everyone the opportunity to be saved but provides no one with the reality of salvation is offensive to God because it does not uphold justice. It does not do justice to the *sovereignty* of God's grace nor does it do justice to the *grace* of God's sovereignty.

Moreover, if there is no *sovereign* grace, there simply is no *real* gospel either. Real redemption requires *really* sovereign grace. Thankfully, in Christ, the Son of God, the sovereign grace of the Father is filled to the infinite brim with warm, tender compassion and with faithful, reliable certainty. That is what *paternally* sovereign grace is all about. That is also what the delegates at Dort were so keen to confess and defend.

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[27] Canons of Dort 1.14.