

Abundant Sufficiency and Intentional Efficacy: Particular Redemption at the Synod of Dort

LEE GATISS

Abstract

This article looks at the background to the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) and examines the debate there on the issue of particular redemption or definite atonement, with a specific focus on the use of the classic distinction between sufficiency and efficacy made famous by Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. It also looks at the variety of Reformed responses to the Remonstrants, including those on the death of Christ that might be categorized as hypothetical universalist. It calls into question the usefulness of the terminology of "four-point Calvinists" to describe delegates such as John Davenant.

Several studies in the last few decades have looked in depth at the Synod's debates and deliverances on the subject of the atonement, which remains one of the most controversial aspects of Reformed doctrine.¹ Since the British delegation was particularly involved on this issue, studies of their role are also

¹ A longer and more detailed version of this article was first published as "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

especially useful.² My aim here is not necessarily to repeat what they have said or even to give a full exposition of the Synod's deliberations. To avoid treating the Canons of Dort in merely an abstract fashion, I will put the Synod into historical context and note some of the diversity among the delegates. I will focus particularly on the classic sufficient–efficient distinction as it was employed at Dort to show that this was carefully nuanced and clarified in a particular direction as a result of the clash with Arminianism. I will also note that although there was widespread agreement among the Reformed concerning the doctrine of particular redemption, there was no monolithic homogeneity but a degree of diversity in their responses to the theological threat.

I. *Historical Context*

The first ecumenical synod of Reformed churches met between November 1618 and May 1619 in the Dutch town of Dordrecht (also known as Dordt or Dort). It comprised the cream of Dutch Reformed theologians, representatives from Great Britain and several important German cities, and separate delegations representing Geneva and the rest of Switzerland. Invitations also went out to the newly combined state of Brandenburg-Prussia, and a row of empty chairs was set up in honor of delegates from the Reformed churches of France, who were prohibited from attending by the French Roman Catholic king, Louis XIII. The importance of this international gathering of Reformed theologians cannot be underestimated, since it is here that the so-called “five points of Calvinism” were first carefully defined.

The United Provinces of the Netherlands were famously tolerant of a certain degree of religious diversity. Having liberated themselves from Spanish Roman Catholic rule, they came together in the Union of Utrecht in 1579, which stated that “nobody shall be persecuted or examined for religious reasons.”³ Nearly a century later, one foreign observer wrote about

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 143–63; see also W. Robert Godfrey, “Tensions within Inter-national Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1974); Stephen Strehle, “The Extent of the Atonement and the Synod of Dort,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51.1 (1989): 1–23; and Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

² Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Anthony Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005).

³ Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, Jonathan Irvine Israel, and G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes, eds., *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 41.

“how many religions there are in this country, which have complete freedom to celebrate their mysteries and to serve God as they please,” including Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Arminians, Anabaptists, Socinians, and even Jews and Turks (Muslims), since “the Estates give an unlimited freedom to all kinds of religions; in Holland you will find more Sects, open and recognized, than in the rest of Europe.”⁴ One Swiss delegate to Dort had the unusual experience of staying with a family where the mother and daughter were Reformed, the father and son Roman Catholic, the grandmother a Mennonite, and an uncle a Jesuit.⁵

Yet this diverse religious culture existed under a Reformed Protestant umbrella; the politically dominant church of the Republic subscribed to the Reformed standards of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. Roman Catholicism, too closely associated with Spanish rule and the Inquisition, was outlawed. This officially Reformed, confessional state was, however, more likely to encourage a conniving containment of religious dissent than either strict enforcement or libertarian laxity. By the end of the seventeenth century, this resulted in what Jonathan Israel describes as “an ambivalent semi-tolerance ... seething with tension, theological and political.”⁶ It is important to recognize that this is the backdrop for the Synod of Dort and also, in part, its legacy.

The union between Holland and Zeeland in 1575 included an agreement to maintain “the practice of the Reformed evangelical religion.”⁷ What this religion actually was, however, became the subject of dispute when Jacobus Arminius had his first clash with the authorities in 1592. After preaching an unorthodox view of Romans 7, he was ordered to consign to oblivion the dispute he had with another preacher over this and not to let it spread beyond their congregations in Amsterdam.⁸ Yet the Arminian controversy was destined to cause great trouble for many years and became part of a political tussle between the republic’s leaders. Political and religious passions ran especially high when there was an attempt in 1607 to persuade Reformed

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Stoupe, *La Religion des Hollandais* (Cologne, 1673), 32, 79. Translations of non-English texts are my own unless stated otherwise.

⁵ See Judith Pollmann, “The Bond of Christian Piety,” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 56.

⁶ Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 676. Cf. Joke Spaans, “Religious Policies in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic,” in Po-Chia Hsia and van Nierop, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*, 72–86.

⁷ Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 362.

⁸ Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 140–46.

leaders to allow a national synod that would amend their doctrinal standards and make the public church theologically broader.

Reformed leaders insisted that the Confession should not be altered. Those who had been inspired by Arminius (who died in 1609) issued a vigorous protest or “Remonstrance” in 1610, in which they detailed their objections to official Reformed doctrine.⁹ This document, according to one Dutch theologian, set the pace for “liberalism” more generally¹⁰ and made five classic doctrinal points concerning predestination, the extent of the atonement, free will, resistible grace, and Christian perseverance. On the atonement, the Arminians asserted that God decreed to save those who by his grace believe and persevere in obedience to the end, and

that in agreement with this, Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world died for all people, every individual, so that he merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross; yet so that no-one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except those who believe.¹¹

A year later at the Hague Conference between leaders on both sides, the Reformed issued a “Counter Remonstrance.” They complained that the *Remonstrance* was deliberately ambiguous and dishonest.¹² They insisted that God decreed the end first, then the means:

That to this end [to save his elect] he has first of all presented and given to them his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, whom he delivered up to the death of the cross in order to save his elect, so that, although the suffering of Christ as that of the only-begotten and unique Son of God is sufficient unto the atonement of the sins of all men, nevertheless the same, according to the counsel and decree of God, has its efficacy unto reconciliation and forgiveness of sins only in the elect and true believer.¹³

⁹ The *Remonstrance* was in harmony with Arminius’s teaching, although not inspired by him alone, and Arminian theology developed further once he died.

¹⁰ Lambertus Jacobus van Holk, “From Arminius to Arminianism in Dutch Theology,” in *Man’s Faith and Freedom: The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius*, ed. Gerald McCulloh (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 41.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (New York: David McKay, 1877), 546 (my translation) citing John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2.

¹² Cf. the assessment of Jan Rohls, “Calvinism, Arminianism and Socinianism in the Netherlands until the Synod of Dort,” in *Socinianism and Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Martin Mulsow and Jan Rohls (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 19.

¹³ Peter Y. De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 247–50.

As William den Boer points out, “for the Remonstrants, sufficiency presupposes actual procurement, as well as the will on God’s part to extend to all what is sufficient for all.”¹⁴ For the Contra-Remonstrants, the will, decree, and counsel of God were focused on the efficacy rather than the sufficiency of redemption. So the meeting broke up without agreement. When those more sympathetic to the Reformed eventually came out on top of the political wrangling, however, it allowed them to call for a synod to clarify the ecclesiastical situation. As a national synod, it would boost the national unification process involving regions and states that up until then had remained relatively independent. But others from outside the Netherlands would also be invited to participate. The scene was set for the biggest ever international gathering of Reformed theologians.

II. *The Canons of Dort on the Death of Christ*

We can learn a great deal about the manner and method of the Synod from its official and unofficial papers and contemporary accounts of its everyday workings. Each delegation prepared its own position paper on the five doctrines chosen by the Arminians for dispute, which were then read in the gathered Synod. After discussion of these papers, later collected and published,¹⁵ the Canons or judgments of the Synod were drawn up.

The Remonstrants themselves spoke several times at the Synod and were repeatedly asked to give an account of their disagreements with the officially accepted doctrine. They had challenged the Confession and sought to amend it for many years, but rather than accept the opportunity to defend their case they engaged in political posturing and obstructive maneuvering. Due to what one British delegate called their “incredible obstinacy,”¹⁶ they were eventually discharged in January 1619. One commentator asserts that this “proves that the whole of the proceedings against the Arminian party were those of a faction, contending for pre-eminence without regard to justice.”¹⁷ Their opinions were, however, very well known and a matter of

¹⁴ William den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 234. Cf. *The Writings of James Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 3:345–46.

¹⁵ *Acta Synodi Nationalis* (Leiden, 1620), 1:78–126; 3:88–153. See Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman Selderhuis, eds., *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae, 1618–1619* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

¹⁶ John Hales, *Golden Remains of the Ever Memorable Mr. John Hales* (London: Printed by Tho. Newcomb, for Robert Pawlet, 1673), 2:73; Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 95.

¹⁷ Frederick Calder, *Memoirs of Simon Episcopus* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1837), 327.

public record, being plainly set out in the *Remonstrance*, the extensive records of the Hague Conference, the *Sententia Remonstrantium* officially presented at two sessions in December 1618,¹⁸ and the published works of their leaders such as Simon Episcopius. These were given a fair hearing by a far-from-homogenous international gathering that cannot fairly be said to represent a mere “faction” within the Dutch church.¹⁹ Those who wrote and subscribed to the Canons of Dort were very well informed about Remonstrant teaching, and the official record celebrates the “diversity in smaller matters” which could be seen among them, as indicating the liberty of speech and judgment they exercised while remaining solidly anti Arminian.²⁰

When it finally came time to deal with the doctrinal issues, the Synod did not deal with the points in the order we might expect. It is true that the acronym TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints) was later invented as a mnemonic for the five areas in dispute at Dort.²¹ However, the central petal, the “L” of so-called “limited atonement,” was actually the *second* head of doctrine covered by the Synod, mirroring its place in the Arminian *Remonstrance*.²² As Alan Sell warns us, the nature of “the five points” as responses should “caution us against thinking that they represent the *sum* of Calvinism,”²³ or even its core. Reformed theology was also committed to the five Reformation *solas* to distinguish it from Roman Catholicism, for example, as well as a sacramentology that distinguished it from Lutheranism and a Trinitarianism that distinguished it from Socinianism—all of which, some may argue, are of greater significance than particular redemption. That is not to say these five points are unimportant, however, since they were church-defining issues at a pivotal moment.

¹⁸ *Acta*, 1:113, 116–18.

¹⁹ Several Synod sessions were spent reading pages out. See, for example, Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:108, 113.

²⁰ See the end of “Præfatio ad Ecclesias,” in *Acta*, 1.

²¹ William Aglionby, *The Present State of the United Provinces* (London: John Starkey, 1669), 283, speaks of a time when “the fancy for tulips did reign over all the Low Countries.” So it is not an entirely inappropriate flower to be associated with a Dutch Synod!

²² Definite atonement did not go by the name “limited atonement” in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries, although the word “limited” was sometimes used, as in William Troughton, *Scripture Redemption, Restrained and Limited* (London: Printed by J. M. for L. Chapman, 1652).

²³ Alan Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 14. Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 425–33.

1. *The Sufficiency of the Cross*

I turn now to the Synod's debates on the sufficiency and efficacy of the atonement and the diversity of Reformed responses to the Arminian use of this formula. The first point made by the Canons on the second head of doctrine, however, concerns the actual need for redemption. God's supreme justice, they say, requires that our sins deserve temporal and eternal punishments. We are unable to do anything about this ourselves, and yet "God, in his infinite mercy, has given us as a Surety his only begotten Son, who, to make satisfaction for us, was made sin and became a curse on the cross, for us and in our place."²⁴ This statement is a classic description of the need for and accomplishment of penal substitutionary atonement.²⁵

The Arminian position at Dort continued to be that

the price of the redemption which Christ offered to God his Father is not only in itself and by itself sufficient to redeem the whole human race but was also paid for all people, every individual, according to the decree, will, and grace of God the Father.²⁶

This takes the first part of the classic medieval formula of Peter Lombard ("sufficient for all, effective for the elect") but pushes it further.²⁷ Not only was the cross sufficient, but it was actually effective in paying for each and every person, and indeed was designed by God to do so. As they had said at the Hague Conference, Christ did not die just for the elect or for those who will finally be saved, but he obtained reconciliation for everyone, and this by the counsel and decree of God.²⁸ Thus the Arminian position on redemption made an explicit claim not just about its extent, but also about its purpose and intention in God's will.

In response to this, the delegates at Dort separated out the two issues of sufficiency and intentionality. As the representatives from Groningen and Omlands said in their submission, the question was not really about the sufficiency of Christ's death at all, for they had no doubts that his sacrifice had such power and value that it was abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of everyone. There was no defect or insufficiency in the cross that could be blamed for the loss of the reprobate. Rather, they said, the question was

²⁴ Articles 2.1–2.2. Translations are from the Latin in *Acta*, 1:241–71. My translation of all the Articles and *Rejectio Errorum* (Rejection of Errors [RE]) on this head can be found in Lee Gatiss, *For Us and For Our Salvation: "Limited Atonement" in the Bible, Doctrine, History, and Ministry* (London: Latimer Trust, 2012).

²⁵ Cf. Heidelberg Catechism 10–13.

²⁶ *Acta*, 1:116.

²⁷ See Peter Lombard, *Sententiae* 3.20.5. Cf. Gatiss, *For Us and For Our Salvation*, 66.

²⁸ *Collatio Scripto Habita Hagae Comitibus*, 139.

about the *intention* (singular) of God the Father and God the Son, and whether together they designed the death of Christ to actually obtain forgiveness and reconciliation for more than just the elect.²⁹ Others, from the Palatinate, Hesse, Belgium, and Utrecht, for example, also linked Christ's sufficiency to his two natures and perfect obedience.³⁰

The Genevan delegation did not, however, utilize the concept of sufficiency. They wrote only of the infinite value of Christ's death, to which is added an efficacious intention for the elect.³¹ In this, they were following Theodore Beza, who considered the Lombardian distinction to be potentially ambiguous and confusing.³² Those from North Holland were somewhat ambivalent about sufficiency,³³ and the ministers of Emden considered the issue using the term *adæquate* rather than *sufficienter*.³⁴ The final approved statement, however, made the following points:

This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, and is of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.

This death, therefore, is of such great value and worth because the person who submitted to it was not only truly man and perfectly holy, but also the only-begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite being with the Father and the Holy Spirit, which it was necessary for our Saviour to be.³⁵

Medieval scholastics debated whether the merit of Christ in his life and death was infinite because of his divine nature, or finite because merited through his human nature.³⁶ The Canons of Dort ground Christ's infinite merit in both his divine nature and his perfect human obedience.³⁷ In distinction from medieval thinkers, seventeenth-century Reformed theologians considered Christ to have acted as a mediator in both his natures rather than just in his human nature,³⁸ and it may be that this lies behind their

²⁹ *Acta*, 3:139.

³⁰ *Acta*, 2:86, 89; 3:88, 117; Heidelberg Catechism 14–18.

³¹ *Acta*, 2:101.

³² W. Robert Godfrey, "Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37.2 (1975): 142.

³³ *Acta*, 3:107–108.

³⁴ *Acta*, 2:120.

³⁵ Articles 2:3–4.

³⁶ See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 190–91.

³⁷ The British spoke of Christ's *thesaurus meritorum*, "treasury of merits" (*Acta*, 2:79), which sounds positively medieval but is an alternative way of discussing sufficiency.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 26, Art. 2; Lombard, *Sentences* 3.19.6–7; John Owen, *Χριστολογία* (London, 1679), 312–13; Westminster Confession 8.7.

connections here. Naturally, however, the early, medieval, and Reformed churches were agreed that Christ could not *be* mediator unless he were both God and man,³⁹ which is why Article 4 adds “which it was necessary for our Saviour to be.”

The British delegation did not use the sufficient–efficient distinction, because they could not agree on it among themselves.⁴⁰ They did, however, link Christ’s “ransom for the sins of the whole world” to the sincere, universal proclamation of the gospel.⁴¹ Others were happier to base indiscriminate preaching on what Michael Thomas calls “ministerial inability to distinguish elect from reprobate.”⁴² Thomas also reads two of the delegations as foreshadowing “Hyper-Calvinism,” backing away from the idea that there is a strict obligation to evangelize everyone. Yet the finally agreed-upon Article 5 asserts rather strongly that

the promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise ought to be declared and published promiscuously and without distinction, to all nations and people to whom God according to his good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

This article places the abundant sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice side-by-side with the necessity for indiscriminate evangelism, but without explicitly making a logical connection between them. It allowed the British (and those like them) to join the dots themselves if they wished but did not spell it out for the sake of those who grounded universal proclamation another way (e.g., simple obedience to Matthew 28:18–20). All this lends credence to Robert Godfrey’s assertion, and my thesis here, that “the history of the Synod when viewed in detail reveals that the Calvinism at Dort was neither irrelevant, monolithic nor uncompromising.”⁴³

One thing was clear, however: if anyone failed to believe and therefore inherit the promise of eternal life through Christ, the finger of blame could not be pointed at Jesus on the cross. Their loss, warns Article 2.6, is “not because of any defect in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross, or indeed any insufficiency in it” (as those from Groningen had put it), “but is their own particular fault.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 108; Lombard, *Sentences* 3.2.3.2.

⁴⁰ See Milton, *British Delegation*, 215; Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:130–31.

⁴¹ *Acta*, 2:78–79. The latter was based on the merits of the former.

⁴² Thomas, *Extent*, 149.

⁴³ Godfrey, “Tensions,” 268.

⁴⁴ Cf. Articles 1.5; 3/4.9.

2. *The Intentional Efficacy of the Cross*

On that sobering note, the Canons turn to discuss the other side of the classic distinction: the effectiveness of the cross for the elect. The efficacy of Christ's work to actually save those given to him by the Father (John 10:25–30) is intimately linked in the Canons to the divine will. What it effected is what God designed, purposed, and intended it to do. The Remonstrants had affirmed not only universal sufficiency but also that the price of redemption was “paid for all people, every individual, *according to the decree, will, and grace of God the Father*.” This meant that no one was excluded from a share in Christ's death by an antecedent decree of God, but only by their own unbelieving abuse of God's gifts.⁴⁵ The Reformed, however, refused to allow God's eternal will to save whomsoever he wished to be thwarted by supposed human freedom, contending instead that he decreed to elect certain people by his unconditional grace and consequently sent Christ to save those people, even giving them the faith they needed to appropriate this salvation.⁴⁶ As Richard Muller neatly summarizes it,

whereas the Reformed doctrine of the will of God tends to resolve all distinctions into a single, simple, eternal will of God to actualize certain possibilities and not others, the Arminian doctrine tends to emphasize the distinctions for the sake of arguing interaction between God and genuinely free or contingent events.⁴⁷

Hence, the Arminians stressed contingency and conditions where the Reformed saw sovereignty and certainty. The latter acknowledged the free offer of the gospel to all; as Article 2.7 puts it, “as many as truly believe ... are by the death of Christ freed and saved from sin and destruction,” not just potentially, but actually. For them, the atonement *did* something, rather than simply making something possible. Yet alongside this temporal, human-level proclamation, the Reformed discerned (in Scripture) the revelation of an eternal divine purpose. Many are called, but few are chosen. Salvation history, they said, has been divinely ordered from the start to achieve God's ultimate goal, which could not be uncertain or in doubt without undermining God's sovereignty.

Article 8, the longest of the positive articles on this head, expounds the particular design of God:

⁴⁵ *Acta*, 1:113–14, 116.

⁴⁶ RE 2.3.

⁴⁷ Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 189.

For this was the most free purpose and most gracious will and intention 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, for bestowing upon them alone justifying faith, thereby to bring them unfailingly to salvation; that is, God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen for salvation and given to him by the Father; that he should bestow upon them faith (which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he acquired for them by his death); that he should purify them by his blood from all sins, both original and actual, whether committed after or before believing; and having faithfully protected them even to the end, should finally establish them glorious before him, free from every spot and blemish.

As far as Dort is concerned, therefore, Lombard's sufficient-efficient distinction needed to be clarified in the light of the Arminian error. Even Arminians could affirm that the cross was ultimately only "efficient for some."⁴⁸ But in doing so, they made each individual's human will the decisive factor, rather than God's will. So the Synod said, more carefully, that the cross was somehow sufficient for all but only *intended* to be efficacious for the elect. By focusing on the divine purpose and design behind the coming of Christ—he came not to make us redeemable but to redeem—the Reformed put human decisions into what they saw as the proper biblical perspective. Hence, they rejected the view of those

who teach: That God the Father has ordained his Son to the death of the cross without a certain and definite purpose to save anyone in particular, so that the necessity, profitableness, and worth of what Christ obtained by his death might remain in good repair, perfect in all its parts, complete and intact, even if the obtained redemption had never in fact been applied to any individual. For this assertion is insulting to the wisdom of God the Father and the merits of Jesus Christ, and is contrary to Scripture.⁴⁹

There was almost unanimous agreement among the delegations about God's will being behind the efficacy of the cross for the elect. There was also widespread agreement on the co-extensive link between Christ's purchase of redemption and its application, which the Remonstrants denied by making the purchase wider than the application.⁵⁰ Those from Nassau-Wetteravia,

⁴⁸ Raymond A. Blacketer, "Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 311.

⁴⁹ RE 2.1.

⁵⁰ See RE 2.6, on the Arminian use of this distinction as introducing "the pernicious poison of Pelagianism."

for example, spoke of Christ being given up “by the will and intention of the Father” to both acquire and apply salvation to those who were given to him, and that they would be given the Spirit of regeneration simultaneously along with forgiveness.⁵¹ So in this Trinitarian view, the Father gives the elect to the Son, who dies for them, and then gives them the Spirit and faith.

3. *Reformed Variations*

Two delegations were divided among themselves on these issues. Those from Britain and Bremen gave minority reports to the Synod and aroused some very strong passions. The British delegation had to write home for help in reconciling their internal divisions, but John Davenant claimed he would rather have his right hand cut off than change his mind, so some compromise was inevitable.⁵² When Matthias Martinius from Bremen expressed some of his opinions indelicately, Franciscus Gomarus was so incensed that he threw down the gauntlet and challenged him to a duel! The Synod President tried to calm things down, but after prayers, Gomarus renewed his request for combat.⁵³ The two would fight again (verbally) in the Synod in an undignified manner which did not impress the other foreign delegates, and though others in the Bremen delegation did not agree with Martinius, they nearly left because of this incivility.⁵⁴

Why the fuss? Martinius was seen by some to incline towards Remonstrant views, particularly on the atonement, and was not afraid to say so or strongly to criticize both sides.⁵⁵ Davenant, however, was stubbornly devoted to the cause of moderation and to finding a middle way on this doctrine. Having been tasked with not upsetting relations with the Lutheran churches (particularly offended by Contra-Remonstrant views here), with not being overly precise, and with taking the Anglican formularies into account,⁵⁶ he and Samuel Ward managed to use their positions in the British delegation to air their minority opinion. Ward, for example, spoke about the cross making all people “redeemable,” thus changing the nature of the atonement from definite to indefinite, following Martinius’s lead.⁵⁷ Their approach eventually triumphed over the other British delegates. Davenant held to a

⁵¹ *Acta*, 2:96–97. Others also linked Christ’s sacrifice and intercession, excluding the reprobate from both, using John 17:9.

⁵² Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:101, 182.

⁵³ The request was never granted.

⁵⁴ Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:109.

⁵⁵ Hales says Martinius “did stand in effect to the tenets of the *Remonstrants*” (*Golden Remains*, 2:131); *Acta*, 2:103–108.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 216–22.

⁵⁷ See Milton, *British Delegation*, 201–3.

sophisticated form of what is now known as hypothetical universalism,⁵⁸ and this made an impact on the British submission. To begin with, this clearly affirmed that “Christ died for the elect out of a special love and intention of both God the Father and Christ, that he might truly obtain and infallibly confer on them forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation.” To make this effectual, God also gives faith and perseverance to those elect; they are saved not “if they are willing” but “because God wills it.”⁵⁹ So far, so anti Arminian.⁶⁰

On top of this, however, the British paper posited a second intention in the cross: Christ also

died for all, that all and every one by means of faith might obtain remission of sins, and eternal life by virtue of that ransom.⁶¹ But Christ so died for the elect, that by the merit of his death in special manner ... they might infallibly obtain both faith and eternal life.⁶²

So as well as dying efficaciously for the elect, Christ also intended to die conditionally for all. As Davenant later explained, “the Divine Will or Intention sometimes denotes merely the appointment of means to an end, although there is no determinate will in God of producing that end by those means.”⁶³ This appears to marry the Reformed insistence on a single, simple will of God with Arminian distinctions concerning contingency; it is in outline the same *via media* construction suggested by Anglican bishop John Overall in an influential paper, where he also speaks of a second “conditional intention” of God as being behind the general grace of the gospel promise.⁶⁴

Further, as a letter from the British divines to the Archbishop of Canterbury explained, there are “some fruits of Christ’s death, not comprised in the decree of Election, but afforded more generally, yet confined to the Visible Church (as viz. true and spiritual Graces accompanying the Gospel,

⁵⁸ See his *Dissertationes duæ: Prima de morte Christi* (Cambridge: Ex officina R. Daniel, 1650), and Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 187–213.

⁵⁹ *Acta*, 2:78.

⁶⁰ The first of three “theses heterodoxæ” rejected by the British also refutes the idea that God’s sole intention in sending Christ was “suspended on the contingent act of man’s faith” (*Acta*, 2:81).

⁶¹ *The Collegiat Suffrage of the Divines of Great Britaine* (London: R. Milbourn, 1629), 47, adds “paid once for all mankind.”

⁶² *Acta*, 2:79.

⁶³ Milton, *British Delegation*, 399.

⁶⁴ CUL [Cambridge University Library], MS Gg/1/29, fo. 6v.

and conferred upon some *non-electi*).⁶⁵ That is, there are spiritual benefits short of conversion (such as those spoken of in Hebrews 6:4–5) that are merited by the cross and dispensed to the nonelect.⁶⁶ Yet, it should be noted, these are only available “in the Church” (the visible church), according to the British.⁶⁷ Word and Spirit are inseparably joined together in the ministry of the Word, they claimed, so when the gospel is proclaimed, there the Spirit is at work, even among the nonelect. The Word “insinuates itself into the secretest closets of the soule” to awaken believers or eventually harden the stubborn.⁶⁸

Many have seen the British as having a major role in softening the Canons of Dort on this head, especially on sufficiency and the gospel call.⁶⁹ Evidently, their views were greatly respected,⁷⁰ and they played a helpful role in mediating many disputes personally. Yet the final Synodical statements about sufficiency can be adequately explained as reflecting the majority view of the Synod, without supposing a British counterweight was necessary to balance Genevan dislike of the concept. The British did not use the standard sufficient–efficient distinction in their submission in any case. They were divided among themselves on whether the universal language in verses such as 1 John 2:2 (partly echoed in their Prayer Book) should be restricted to the elect only.⁷¹ Perhaps this too was left undefined in the Articles as a result of British concerns, but again this is speculation.⁷²

British concerns probably did lie behind the statement of the gospel promise in Article 2.5. This does not, however, enlarge grace beyond the elect per se, as Davenant would have wished, or put forward an unconditional new covenant for the elect alongside a conditional gospel covenant for all,⁷³ or even connect theoretical sufficiency with universal proclamation. However, what Davenant wanted to protect by means of his twofold-intention

⁶⁵ Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:185.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:187.

⁶⁷ *Acta*, 2:79.

⁶⁸ *Collegiat Suffrage*, 52. This view seems to be reflected in Dort’s Article 3/4.9, where it is said that “various gifts” are conferred by God on those who are called by the ministry of the Word but do not come to Christ.

⁶⁹ White, *Predestination*, 191; Godfrey, “Tensions,” 263–64; and Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 213.

⁷⁰ The British view is always placed first in the foreign position papers in the *Acta*, which indicates a certain primacy of honor.

⁷¹ Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:101, 130–31; Milton, *British Delegation*, 215.

⁷² Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 98. We await a definitive study by Sinnema and Milton of the scattered documents relating to the formation of the Canons, which will shed light on these issues.

⁷³ Davenant’s covenant schema, as seen in Milton, *British Delegation*, 398–99.

theory was the idea that if people are not saved “it arises from themselves alone, and the hardness of their heart repelling the means of salvation.”⁷⁴ The Canons, as with several delegations, made exactly this point in Article 2.6, without needing to posit contingency or conditionality in God’s eternal will. Article 2.8 affirmed that God “willed that Christ ... should *effectually* redeem ... all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen,” but this left a backdoor open for Davenant and others by not actually denying an ultimately *ineffectual* universal redemption in addition to this.⁷⁵ Other Reformed statements on the subject were phrased in such a way as to exclude this view, but Dort refrained from doing so.⁷⁶ Without the British pressing the Synod on these points, the Canons may perhaps not have been so carefully stated.

Genevan delegate Giovanni Diodati complained that the English were “so scrupulous and speculative” on these matters and had so many difficulties that it caused a great deal of time and trouble to find “the centre point.”⁷⁷ Yet he did not see their hypothetical universalism as a grave threat to Reformed unity.⁷⁸ Walter Balcanquhall reported to the British Ambassador, at the end of all the wrangling, that regarding the atonement

there was not altogether so uniform a consent both in regard of phrases and forms of speaking, and in regard of some propositions, as was in the first Article: yet certainly there was very great [agreement], more than could well have been expected from so great a number of learned men in so hard and controverted an Article.⁷⁹

III. *After the Synod*

In the immediate wake of the Synod, around two hundred Remonstrants were deprived of their right to preach by the authorities. A fifth of these subsequently conformed and were reinstated, while approximately seventy agreed not to preach or teach but to live quiet lives as private citizens. The remainder, who refused to follow either of these courses, were banished

⁷⁴ Ibid., 397, 401.

⁷⁵ Jonathan D. Moore, “The Extent of the Atonement,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 145–46.

⁷⁶ *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (Leiden, 1625), XXIX.xxix, says, “the end, object, and ‘for whom’ (ꝑ or cui) of satisfaction is only Elect and true believers.”

⁷⁷ MS Lullin 53, fols. 55^r–55^v.

⁷⁸ Nicolas Fornerod, “A Reappraisal of the Genevan Delegation,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred A. van Lieburg, Brill’s Series in Church History 49 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 211.

⁷⁹ Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:132.

from the United Provinces, which could ill afford internal strife or potential civil war, as the Twelve Year Truce with Spain came to an end and Europe geared up for what became the Thirty Years War.⁸⁰ To complete his consolidation of power in the fragmented provinces, the Prince of Orange ensured that his rival (and patron of the Arminians) van Oldenbarnevelt was executed before that bloody, religious conflict could begin. Hugo Grotius was imprisoned but soon made a famous escape to Roman Catholic France, where other leading Arminians also fled. Foreign delegations urged mildness and peace upon the Dutch as they departed and, indeed, the Remonstrant Brotherhood was openly tolerated within a few years, though no longer within the pale of the official national church.

The French Reformed church, whose delegates had been kept away from the Synod, adopted the Canons for themselves as binding on churches and universities.⁸¹ There were also attempts in England, as Arminianism began to rise there, to bring peace to the church by officially adopting the Canons alongside the Thirty-Nine Articles, but these were ultimately unsuccessful.⁸² In 1646, however, the Westminster Assembly debated the issue of the extent of the atonement, and Dortian divisions cast their shadow over the proceedings, with a range of Reformed opinions again being acknowledged.⁸³ The Canons of Dort have since been accepted as part of the confessional make-up of several denominations and institutions around the world and, given their origin in such an honored assembly, are often considered a touchstone of Reformed orthodoxy.

That the Canons of Dort carefully left certain questions undecided and were framed to enable subscription by Davenant and Ward is significant. It has been suggested that Davenant held to an Amyraldian view of the order of God's decrees—before Moïse Amyraut. There is no real evidence for this,⁸⁴ but it is clear that Davenant did espouse a variety of Reformed hypothetical universalism. It is not true that the Overall-Davenant position (shared to a large extent by others such as Archbishop Ussher) was the

⁸⁰ Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 462–63; Spaans, “Religious Policies,” 78; Archibald Harrison, *Beginnings of Arminianism to the Synod of Dort* (London: University of London Press, 1926), 287–88.

⁸¹ *Articles Agreed on in the Nationall Synode of the Reformed Churches of France, Held at Charenton* (Oxford: Printed by John Lichfield and James Short, 1624).

⁸² Milton, *British Delegation*, 383; Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 152, 170, 176–77.

⁸³ See my two chapters on the Westminster Assembly debate in Lee Gatiss, *Cornerstones of Salvation: Foundations and Debates in the Reformed Tradition* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 2017), 117–58.

⁸⁴ Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 188, n. 74, against Thomas, *Extent*, 151, 165.

definitive Church of England word on the subject, as Peter White claims.⁸⁵ The other British delegates did not think so, and neither did the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁸⁶ There were many fights still to come over what the official Anglican view was.⁸⁷

Those who have since held to Reformed varieties of hypothetical universalism have sometimes referred to themselves as “four or four-and-a-half point Calvinists.” This designation, however, may well be technically inaccurate for some. Despite disagreements with other delegations, Davenant and Ward happily subscribed to the original “pristine” statement of “five-point Calvinism.” Perhaps, then, others who take a less “strict,” non-Genevan view on this issue may also lay claim, historically speaking, to all five petals of the TULIP. Richard Baxter certainly considered himself to be in accord with Dort, despite his famous disagreement with John Owen on the issue.⁸⁸ Indeed, he stated that “the meer *Doctrinal Decrees* of the Synod of Dort are so moderate and healing, that where Violence hath been forborn, and Reason used, many have been pacified by them.”⁸⁹ The question, however, must be whether he or hypothetical universalists today are as careful to avoid the slippery slope of Arminianism as the British at Dort were; and whether the Reformed are as willing now as they were at Dort to tolerate a certain amount of diversity within their robust internal debates, while also avoiding an unevangelistic hyper-Calvinism.

⁸⁵ White, *Predestination*, 191.

⁸⁶ Milton, *British Delegation*, 215. George Carleton was aware of some bishops holding to a more Arminian view on atonement but confessed, “I never thought that their Opinions were the Doctrine of the Church of England” (Hales, *Golden Remains*, 2:180).

⁸⁷ See Henry Hickman, *Historia Quinq-Articularis Exarticulata* (London: Printed for Robert Boulter, 1673). From the next century, Augustus Toplady, *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England* (London: Printed for George Keith, 1774) is a classic defense of Anglican Reformed credentials on this and other points.

⁸⁸ In *Richard Baxter's Confession of His Faith* (London, 1655), 25, Baxter writes, “In the article of the extent of redemption, wherein I am most suspected and accused ... I do subscribe to the Synod of Dort, without any exception, limitation, or exposition of any word as doubtful and obscure.” See Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (1993; repr., Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2004), 209–19.

⁸⁹ Richard Baxter, *The True History of Councils* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1682), 184. Cf. Baxter's views on Dort in *Catholic Theologie* (London: Printed by Robert White, for Nevill Simmons, 1675), I.i.124–26; ii.51–54; iii.67–69; II.57–59, 61, and *Universal Redemption of Mankind* (London: For John Salusbury, 1694).