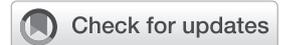


Religious moderation in the Canons of Dort

**Author:**Billy Kristanto¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Faculty of Theology,
International Reformed
Evangelical Seminary, Jakarta,
Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Billy Kristanto,
bkrstn@yahoo.com

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The Canons of Dort have historically functioned as a source of division and polarisation between Calvinist and Arminian traditions. This article, however, proposes a more nuanced reading, highlighting a moderated theological posture within the *Canons* themselves. Positioned historically and theologically between the writings of John Calvin and the later developments of Reformed Orthodoxy, the *Canons* are presented here as a transitional document, offering a mediating position. Within the broader Protestant context, the *Canons* exhibit notable affinities with the Lutheran Confessions and even engage constructively with several concerns raised in the Five Articles of Remonstrance. Furthermore, the article identifies thematic resonances between the *Canons* and aspects of Roman Catholic theology, suggesting that the *Canons* reflect a more irenic and integrative theological trajectory than is often acknowledged.

Contribution: This study contributes to the understanding of the *Canons* of Dort by revealing their ecumenical potential, which is worth exploring. It also reassesses the *Canons'* rootedness in Christocentric soteriology, moving beyond traditional confessional readings. Their moderate infralapsarianism and nuanced engagement with Arminian concerns foster theological dialogue. Resonances with Lutheran and Catholic traditions, especially in doctrines of perseverance and grace, underscore the *Canons'* capacity to mediate across confessional divides and promote unity without compromising Reformed convictions.

Keywords: ecumenical reading; election; Christ's death; comfort; assurance of salvation.

Introduction

Interpreting the Canons of Dort through a lens of religious moderation is a challenging task. Historically, the *Canons* have served not only as a defining document of Reformed Orthodoxy but also as a catalyst for division, both during the era of confessional conflicts and in contemporary theological discourse (see Boettner 1983; Palmer 1980; Sinema 2011b:313–333; Steele & Thomas 1963; Van Eijnatten 2011:421–422).¹ Yet, in an age increasingly marked by ecclesial polarisation, an ecumenically sensitive reading of the *Canons* may offer fresh possibilities for constructive engagement. While the polemical nature of the *Canons* cannot be ignored, this study seeks to foreground their potential points of convergence with other theological traditions.

The British delegate Joseph Hall famously urged a spirit of unity among Christians: to be of one spirit, one body and one mind (see *Acta Synodi Nationalis* 1620: session 16). Such a sentiment, albeit marginal in the context of the Synod, nonetheless gestures towards a more irenic reading of the *Canons*. Despite their firmly confessional character, the *Canons* were the product of a synodical process that, in certain respects, was animated by a desire for doctrinal clarity without excessive dogmatism. This study proposes that the *Canons*, situated between the theology of John Calvin and the more rigid formulations of later Reformed Orthodoxy, exhibit a degree of theological moderation often overlooked in contemporary interpretations. A more moderate interpretation of the *Canons* of Dort has been considered by scholars such as Salazar and Horton (see Beeke & Klauber:87, 111). In this article, however, I not only explore the moderate reception of the *Canons* by subsequent Reformed theologians but also argue for a moderate reading of the *Canons* themselves, considered in light of their historical context.

Strictly speaking, the *Canons* of Dort were not intended as an ecumenical document. The Synod did not aim to reconcile its positions with Lutheran theology, let alone with Roman Catholic doctrine. Nevertheless, this article contends that certain doctrinal formulations within the *Canons* possess ecumenical potential, particularly when read with attention to underlying theological concerns shared across confessional boundaries. Can the doctrine of election be construed in a way that

1. Sinnema provides a careful examination of the process of confessionalisation from the initial function of the *Canons* as a judgement on Arminianism to a confessional standard. Van Eijnatten points out that at the 350th anniversary of the *Canons* in 1968, the Synod was regarded by a Mennonite theology professor as an authoritarian denial of the church's ecumenicity.

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emphasises inclusivity? Does the formulation of Christ's death, its sufficiency and efficacy, offer resources for a more ecumenically applicable soteriology? How might the doctrines of human depravity and effectual grace be understood in light of broader Christian anthropological and pneumatological frameworks? Finally, is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints amenable to ecumenical reinterpretation?

While each article of the *Canons* could be explored for its potential contributions to theological moderation, this paper limits its scope to the main doctrinal points. In doing so, it aims to recover a more nuanced and dialogical reading of this pivotal Reformed confession.

Election as a doctrine of inclusion

The doctrine of election has often been construed as an exclusive theological construct, one that came to characterise Reformed identity, particularly during the confessional era. It was frequently invoked as a point of divergence between Reformed and Lutheran soteriology. However, a more nuanced reading reveals that election need not be framed solely in terms of exclusion or rigid determinism. As Christian Link has suggested, a critical distinction can be made between understanding election as predestination and understanding it as an expression of divine grace (see Link 2009:112–118).

In the final edition of his *Institutes*, John Calvin locates the doctrine of election within the framework of soteriology, rather than under the broader category of the divine decree. While election cannot be entirely divorced from God's sovereign decree, Calvin's emphasis invites a reading of election primarily as a manifestation of God's gracious initiative in salvation.

The *Canons of Dort* align more closely with Calvin than with Theodore Beza in this respect, beginning their discussion of election within a soteriological rather than decretal context. The First Head of Doctrine opens by affirming God's just prerogative to condemn all humanity on account of sin (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.1). This is immediately followed by an articulation of divine grace through the citation of John 3:16, portraying God's love as universally manifested in the sending of Christ (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.2). The *Canons* then stress that this manifestation of grace is to be proclaimed indiscriminately through the preaching of the gospel (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.3). Yet, the human response to this proclamation is divided: while some accept the gospel, others reject it (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.4). The *Canons* are careful to locate the cause of unbelief in human sinfulness, whereas the origin of faith is attributed entirely to God (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.5).

Only at this point do the *Canons* introduce the doctrine of God's eternal decree (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.6), thereby situating predestination within a broader theological narrative of divine mercy and human responsibility. Article I.7 (Reformed Church in America 2011), which articulates the doctrine of election proper, thus

emerges not as an abstract metaphysical assertion but as a theological affirmation embedded in the logic of grace and the pastoral concern of the gospel's efficacy:

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin.²

Election, as presented in the *Canons of Dort*, is decreed and accomplished by God as a manifestation of divine mercy and grace. This theological emphasis opens an avenue for ecumenical engagement, particularly if Reformed communities foreground the gracious character of election rather than framing it primarily in terms of the divine decree. Such a perspective not only aligns more closely with the pastoral and doxological intent of the *Canons* but also fosters a spirit of evangelical zeal, as expressed in the declaration that 'by this ministry people are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified' (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.3).

The structure of the First Head of Doctrine, which begins with the universal sinfulness of humanity and the universal offer of the gospel, suggests an infralapsarian rather than a supralapsarian orientation. This orientation is further confirmed by key phrases such as 'out of the entire human race, which had fallen' and the assertion that God 'leaves [*the reprobate*] in the common misery', both of which presuppose the fall as the historical context of divine election (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.15). In theological method, supralapsarianism tends to proceed a priori, prioritising the ontological ordering of God's decrees, whereas infralapsarianism proceeds a posteriori, beginning with human history and experience (a noetic approach) and reflecting on election in light of the gospel's proclamation (Rohls 1998:150).³

While some Dutch delegates to the Synod, such as Franciscus Gomarus, adhered to supralapsarianism, the *Canons* were more decisively shaped by infralapsarian perspectives, particularly those of German theologians like Bartholomäus Keckermann, a staunch adherent of the Heidelberg Catechism. Keckermann's influence reflects a broader tendency within the Synod to articulate Reformed doctrine in a way that preserved both doctrinal integrity and a moderated tone, resisting the more stringent formulations of Beza's supralapsarianism.

Historically, Jacob Arminius had been tasked with refuting Dirck Coornhert's critique of Beza's supralapsarianism. Yet Arminius himself found supralapsarianism unconvincing and, in response, articulated an alternative framework that ultimately shaped the Five Articles of Remonstrance. Given this context, the Synod of Dort could have responded

2. All English translation of the *Canons of Dort* throughout this article is taken from Reformed Church in America (2011).

3. In the words of Rohls: 'Election is ontically prior (*prius*); justification, ontically subsequent (*posterius*). But election is noetically subsequent; justification, noetically prior'.

polemically by reaffirming supralapsarianism as a confessional standard. Instead, the Synod opted for an infralapsarian framework, thereby softening the theological tone of its rebuttal. This deliberate choice may be interpreted as one of the ecumenical potentials of the *Canons*, a move away from rigid decree towards a theologically responsible and pastorally sensitive articulation of election.

It is true that the *Canons* explicitly reject the Arminian assertion that election is based on foreseen faith and obedience, affirming instead that election proceeds from God's sovereign good pleasure. Yet they do not rest content with this causal explanation. The *Canons* also place significant theological weight on the *telos*, *fruits* and *effects* of election. This soteriological and pastoral orientation, focusing on the transforming impact of divine election rather than merely its decretive basis, opens space for broader theological dialogue and renders the doctrine more accessible to traditions concerned with the moral and spiritual dimensions of salvation:

This same election took place, not on the basis of foreseen faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness ... but rather for the purpose of faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, and so on. Accordingly, election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its *fruits* and *effects* (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.9 [Author's own emphasis]).

Ecumenical potential emerges not only in discussions concerning the *cause* of election but also, perhaps more significantly, in its *purpose* and *goal*. Jürgen Moltmann has notably revived interest in this dimension through his reflections on predestination and perseverance, underscoring the eschatological and pastoral implications of election (see Moltmann 1961:31–51). The *Canons of Dort* clearly reject the notion that perseverance in faith and obedience is the *cause* of election (cf. I.2.1). Rather, they affirm that perseverance is a *fruit* of election, grounded in God's sovereign grace. While this marks a decisive theological divergence from the Five Arminian Articles (Schaff 1882b: article I) regarding the source of election, there remains common ground in the affirmation that perseverance in faith and obedience follows from faith itself and is sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

A further ecumenical point lies in the *Canons'* affirmation of election *in Christo*. As Sinnema (2019:132) has observed, subsequent revisions to the final form of the *Canons* underscore not merely that salvation is in Christ, but more pointedly that election itself is in Christ, an emphasis that closely mirrors the language and theology of Ephesians 1:4. Citing Ephesians 1:4–6, the *Canons* declare that God accomplished election 'in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation' (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.7). This formulation is in continuity with Calvin's assertion that election 'is to be understood and recognised in Christ alone', emphasising the Christocentric nature of divine election. The Second Helvetic Confession

expresses a similar conviction: 'Therefore, although not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ' (Schaff 1882e:252).

This Christocentric focus continued into early Reformed Orthodoxy, where theologians such as Polanus contributed further development.⁴ Polanus famously concluded: 'The election of Christ is the foundation and main support of the election of angels and men' (Polanus 1617:IV.viii). For Polanus, Christ, as elected mediator in his human nature, could not precede the divine decree (Muller 1986:156).⁵ Thus, in his theological framework, the *election of Christ* is itself a divine decree that forms the basis of the election of humankind. This marks a subtle, but important shift: whereas Calvin rooted election in the believer's union and fellowship with Christ, Polanus viewed the decree of Christ's election as logically prior (see Huijgen 2018:126–127; Stanglin 2007:227–231),⁶ establishing a more formal ontological grounding in the divine counsel (Rohls 1998:164).⁷

The *Canons of Dort* may be seen as occupying a mediating position between Calvin and Polanus, offering a transitional formulation that holds both emphases in creative tension. On the one hand, the *Canons* affirm, 'God decreed to give to Christ those chosen for salvation'; on the other, they state that God also decreed 'to call and draw effectively into *Christ's fellowship* ... to grant them true faith in Christ ... after powerfully preserving them in the *fellowship of the Son*' (Reformed Church in America 2011:I.7 [Author's own emphasis]). Election, therefore, can be viewed both from the vantage point of the divine decree and from the perspective of participation in Christ. This dual emphasis anticipates, to some extent, later developments in Karl Barth's Christocentric doctrine of election, in which election is fundamentally determined in and through the person of Jesus Christ (Barth 1957:94).⁸ Although Barth's formulation is distinctively his own, his theological trajectory echoes the *Canons'* foundational insight: that election is not to be abstracted from Christ but is fully intelligible only in relation to him.

This theme of *election in Christ* also finds strong resonance in Lutheran theology. The *Formula of Concord*, citing Ephesians 1:4ff., warns against speculation on the secret counsel of God and instead exhorts believers to seek assurance in the Word, specifically in Christ, 'who is the

4.Recent scholarship by Klauber, Harding, and Borvan has examined the figure of Pierre du Moulin, a staunch defender of Reformed Orthodoxy whose approach shifted from an initially irenic posture to a more polemical stance (see Beeke/Klauber:28–34, 42, 61–64). In this context, I have chosen Amandus Polanus as a representative voice of Reformed Orthodoxy in order to trace the development of theological thought after the *Canons of Dort*.

5.Muller comments that the name Christ in the theology of Polanus is 'no longer loosely applied after the fashion of Calvin but applied strictly as the title of the elected mediator'.

6.The Synod of Dort also avoided calling Christ the foundation of election, because apparently the Remonstrants preferred this formula to denote that faith in Christ preceded election.

7.Such a position, although it is only one view among many others during Reformed Orthodoxy, is aptly summarised by Rohls: 'Christ is not the ground of God's gracious election, but the means of carrying out this election'.

8.Barth writes: 'Before Him and without Him and beside Him God does not, then, elect or will anything. And He is the election (and on that account the beginning and the decree and the Word) of the free grace of God'.

Book of Life, in whom all are written and elected that are to be saved in eternity' (Schaff 1882c:I.11.7). Similarly, the *Solid Declaration* of the Formula affirms: 'This eternal election of God is to be considered in Christ, and not outside of or without Christ' (Book of Concord 1584:II.11.65). Here again, the centrality of Christ provides a theological meeting point across confessional divides, revealing yet another ecumenical potential embedded within the *Canons'* doctrine of election.

The ecumenical implications of the doctrine of election may find concrete expression in the administration of the Lord's Supper. From this perspective, Reformed churches can bear witness to their (full) communion with all the elect, including those who belong to other theological traditions. This approach affirms an open communion with all true believers, rather than limiting participation to members of Reformed churches alone.

Christ's death and human redemption

The Second Head of Doctrine in the *Canons of Dort* opens with a reaffirmation of God's justice, which necessitates the punishment of sin. Within this framework, the *Canons* clearly affirm a satisfaction theory of the atonement: Christ 'was made sin, and became a curse for us and in our stead, that he might make satisfaction to divine justice on our behalf' (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.2).. This articulation reflects theological influences from Theodore Beza and, perhaps more directly, from the Heidelberg Catechism (see Beza 1992:10–11; Schaff 1882d:HC Q 11; Sinnema 2011a:93). The satisfaction theory espoused in the *Canons* represents a synthesis of Anselmian and penal substitutionary motifs.

On the one hand, the *Canons* underscore that human sin, committed against the infinite majesty of God, demands just punishment unless satisfaction is rendered to divine justice (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.1). Humanity, incapable of making such satisfaction or of delivering itself from divine wrath, stands in need of a Redeemer (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.2). This concern for God's majesty and wrath closely aligns with the Anselmian model, which emphasises the gravity of sin as an affront to divine honour and the consequent necessity of satisfaction.

On the other hand, the *Canons* explicitly state that Christ 'was made to be sin for us', assuming the place of sinners so that he might make satisfaction on their behalf (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.2). His death is described as 'the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins' (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.3). In this formulation, satisfaction is framed as a vicarious and penal act, an obligatory payment that Christ renders in the place of sinners. This emphasis corresponds more closely with the penal substitution theory of atonement, which interprets Christ's death as a judicial substitution bearing the penalty because of sin.⁹

9.Compare Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 16, which also emphasises the obligatory payment for sin.

Importantly, the *Canons* hold together two theological affirmations that might otherwise appear in tension: the doctrine of definite (or particular) redemption and the universal sufficiency of Christ's atoning work (see Muller 2012:59; Olson 2009:221).¹⁰ Article II.3 (Reformed Church in America 2011). affirms the latter when it states that Christ's death is 'of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world'. Because of the infinite value of Christ's atoning death, the gospel is to be proclaimed universally, to all people without distinction.

The *Canons of Dort* reflect this conviction by integrating aspects of the universal scope of redemption that had been emphasised in the Five Arminian Articles (*contra* Stanglin 2019:325–352).¹¹ Notably, the *Canons* affirm that 'no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer', echoing the language and logic of John 3:16 (Schaff 1882b:546). Simultaneously, they declare that the promise of salvation in that verse:

[T]ogether with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel. (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.5)

In this formulation, both the *Canons* and the Arminian Articles agree that Christ's death is universally sufficient and that forgiveness is effectively applied only to those who believe.

Thus, both confessional traditions affirm the dual aspect of Christ's atonement, its *universal sufficiency* and its *particular efficacy*. The primary point of divergence lies not in this shared structure, but in what each tradition considers the ground of efficacy: the Arminian Articles root it in the believer's faith, while the *Canons* ground it in God's sovereign election.

The distinction between the sufficiency and efficiency of Christ's death, often associated with the Synod of Dort, in fact has deep roots in the medieval theological tradition. It was explicitly articulated by figures such as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas (Lombard 2008:86).¹² Aquinas in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1–6a, for instance, wrote:

He [*Christ*] is the propitiation for our sins, for some efficaciously, but for all sufficiently, because the price of his blood is sufficient for the salvation of all: but it has no efficacy except for the elect because of an impediment. (Aquinas 1858:3, 68)

10.The term *limited atonement* was neither mentioned nor taught by the *Canons of Dort*. It tends to mislead people from the original understanding. This term was rather coined by Arminians.

11.Stanglin argues, however, that the misbehaviour of the Remonstrants should be understood from the Remonstrant perspective, which believed that the delegates of the Synod had already known the predetermined outcome of the Synod of Dort, thereby ignoring the Remonstrant concerns.

12.Lombard wrote, 'He [*Christ*] offered himself on the altar of the cross not to the devil, but to the triune God, and he did so for all with regard to the sufficiency of the price, but only for the elect with regard to its efficacy, because he brought about salvation only for the predestined'.

Both Lombard and Aquinas relate the *efficacy* of Christ's atonement directly to the doctrine of election, not to the act of faith itself. In this respect, medieval theology stands in closer continuity with the position of the *Canons* than with that of the Arminian Articles.

An ecumenical potential within the *Canons* lies in their use of universal language regarding the sufficiency of Christ's death. The commonly used term *limited atonement* fails to do justice to this nuanced articulation, as it risks obscuring the dual emphasis present in the *Canons*.¹³ A more accurate formulation would be *universal sufficiency and particular efficacy*. While the doctrine of particular redemption was strongly advocated by Theodore Beza, particularly in his debate with the Lutheran theologian Jacob Andreae at the Colloquy of Montbéliard in 1586, Andreae, as a signatory to the *Formula of Concord*, defended the universal aspect of Christ's redeeming work (see Archibald 1998:357, 364).

The *Formula of Concord* itself affirms:

Therefore, if we wish to consider our eternal election to salvation with profit, we must in every way hold sturdily and firmly to this, that, as the preaching of repentance, so also the promise of the gospel is universalis (universal), that is, it pertains to all men, Luke 24:47. For this reason Christ has commanded that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations. (Book of Concord 1584:II.11.28)

Aware of the theological divergence between the Lutheran affirmation of the universal scope of the gospel and the Calvinist emphasis on particular redemption, the Synod of Dort could have chosen to articulate a strictly particularist view of Christ's atonement (see Godfrey 1975:138–150).¹⁴ However, the Synod deliberately included both particular and universal dimensions of Christ's redemptive work. This is clearly expressed in the declaration:

This promise [*of the gospel*], together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel. (Reformed Church in America 2011:II.5)

The incorporation of this universal element was significantly influenced by the British delegation, particularly Bishop John Davenant, who, acting on behalf of King James I, was tasked with promoting a conciliatory and ecumenical posture, especially towards the Lutheran tradition. Davenant's advocacy helped ensure that the *Canons* retained a theological openness to the universal proclamation of the gospel, even while maintaining the Reformed commitment to the particular efficacy of Christ's atonement (see Moore 2011:177–179).¹⁵

13. This conceptual imprecision is among the key reasons why certain later confessional Reformed theologians erroneously assumed a more stringent position at Dort. In response, they introduced terminology that failed to reflect the *Canons*' broader affirmation of both the universal sufficiency and the particular efficacy of Christ's death.

14. Other than Beza, Reformed theologians like Vermigli, Olevianus, Perkins, and Ames embraced particular redemption.

15. On the indirect influence of James Ussher on the *Canons of Dort* via John Davenant, Moore has provided an explanation.

Human corruption, conversion and the manner of divine grace

The Reformed doctrine of human corruption is often criticised as unduly pessimistic, allegedly presenting such a radical view of depravity that it appears to assert an *imago Satanæ* rather than the *imago Dei* (see Giles 2009:351–352). This, however, is a misrepresentation. While certain figures, such as the Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus, explicitly advanced the notion of a corrupted human nature as the *image of Satan*, the Reformed tradition has consistently resisted such formulations. Rather than asserting the total absence of goodness in fallen humanity, Reformed anthropology understands depravity primarily as the 'inability to save oneself from sin' apart from divine grace (Muller 2012:60). The emphasis is not on glorifying human corruption but on preparing the way for the gospel's redemptive power.

This theological structure is evident in John Calvin's *Institutes*, where the treatment of human sinfulness and the fall (Calvin 2011:II.1–5) is immediately followed by a discussion of redemption in Christ (Calvin 2011:II.6). Similarly, the *Canons of Dort* dedicate five articles (Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.1–5) to the exposition of human corruption before introducing the gospel (Reformed Church in America 2011: III/IV.6). In this framework, the doctrine of sin is not a terminal point but a prolegomenon to soteriology, paralleling the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel.

In comparison to Calvin's sometimes uncompromising rhetoric, the *Canons of Dort* adopt a more measured tone in their description of postlapsarian humanity (see Hancock 2016:322–325). They affirm that, despite the fall, human beings retain 'the glimmerings of natural light', which include some knowledge of God, the natural order, moral distinctions and even a certain inclination towards social virtue and order (Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.4). However, they insist that this residual natural light is insufficient to lead anyone to salvific knowledge of God. The Arminian Articles of 1610 concur on this point, asserting that fallen humanity lacks the capacity to perform truly salvific good, such as exercising saving faith without divine regeneration. They affirm the necessity of new birth 'of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit' (Schaff 1882b: article III).

The *Canons of Dort*, following this recognition of the inadequacy of natural light and the law (Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.4–5), proceed to affirm that genuine conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit (Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.6). In this, both Reformed and Arminian traditions affirm the indispensability of regeneration by the Spirit, even as they differ in articulating the manner in which grace operates.

The Reformed doctrine of efficacious grace, often described as 'irresistible', is frequently misunderstood. While Arminians maintain that divine grace can be resisted, the *Canons* deny that those whom God effectually calls

and regenerates can ultimately resist this internal work of the Spirit (Schaff 1882b; see Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.2, 8).¹⁶ Importantly, the *Canons* distinguish between common grace, which can indeed be resisted, and the regenerating grace of God, which is effectual.¹⁷ Thus, the text acknowledges that many who experience the outward call and receive various divine gifts nevertheless ‘refuse to come and be converted’ (III/IV.9). The term *irresistible*, then, refers not to the impossibility of resisting all forms of divine influence, but to the invincibility of God’s internal work of regeneration. Externally, grace may be resisted; internally, God’s regenerating work succeeds.

Contemporary discomfort with the term *irresistible* often arises from associations with coercion or external compulsion. While the *Canons* do invoke the divine omnipotence in explaining the efficacy of grace, such power must not be construed in mechanistic or colonial terms. Rather, it may be understood as the power of divine love, the power to transform the heart. Far from endorsing regeneration by coercion, the *Canons* affirm that God, by his irresistible love, gently but effectually softens the hardened heart. The precise operation of the Spirit remains mysterious, but believers experience it as an enabling grace that leads them to believe from the heart and love their Saviour (see Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.13).

This understanding aligns closely with the thought of both Calvin and Augustine. Calvin insists that divine grace does not move the human will by brute force: ‘Man is not borne along without any motion of the heart, as if by an outside force; rather, he is so affected within that he obeys from the heart’ (Calvin 2011:II.3.14). Calvin here draws from Augustine, who describes God’s drawing of the soul as an internal movement of love rather than coercion. Reflecting on John 6:44, Augustine writes:

Nuts are shown to a child, and he is attracted; he is drawn by what he runs to, drawn by loving it, drawn without hurt to the body, drawn by a cord of the heart. (Schaff 1888:XXVI.5)

Divine grace is efficacious because it works inwardly through love, bringing about not just the possibility but the actuality of faith.

The *Canons* explicitly reject any conception of regenerating grace as mere moral persuasion – that is, a grace that appeals only to the will without effecting internal transformation. Such a view, they contend, borders on Pelagianism. Their position is thoroughly Augustinian: grace not only invites but also accomplishes the assent of the will (see Reformed Church in America 2011:III/IV.2,7; Sinnema 2011a:88).¹⁸

16.While the *Canons of Dort* unequivocally rejected Arminian theology, they stopped short of declaring it heretical, instead designating it as a doctrinal error warranting rejection.

17.The term *common grace* was used in the *Canons of Dort* in III/IV.2, 5. The term can help explain the need to distinguish between regenerating grace and various gifts conferred through external calling.

18.There are 65 references to Augustine in the judgements (*judicia*) of the 19 delegations of the synod, which were covered in the printed *Acta* of the synod.

Augustine’s distinction between created and corrupted nature is especially pertinent here. Created nature, he argues, arises from ‘the bounty of the Creator’ and is good; corrupted nature, by contrast, is the result of inherited sin and is evil (Augustine 1887:II.38). Crucially, the regenerate do not beget regenerate offspring. Augustine observes:

A regenerate man does not regenerate, but generates, sons according to the flesh; and thus he transmits to his posterity, not the condition of the regenerated, but only of the generated. (Augustine 1887:II.45)

This theological anthropology is echoed in the *Canons’* statement:

A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring. Hence all the posterity of Adam, Christ only excepted, have derived corruption from their original parent, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature. (Reformed Church in America 2011:III.IV.2)

Thus, the Reformed tradition, in line with Augustine, affirms that while human nature remains structurally intact after the fall, it is morally and spiritually perverted, requiring divine intervention for restoration. The doctrine of total depravity is not a doctrine of utter worthlessness but of comprehensive need – a need that only efficacious, Spirit-wrought grace can fulfil.

Perseverance of the saints as pastoral comfort

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, as articulated in the *Canons of Dort*, possesses significant ecumenical potential, particularly in its accommodation of human imperfection and its pastoral sensitivity to the lived experience of believers. The Fifth Article of the *Remonstrance* affirms that:

[T]hose who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory. (Schaff 1882b:548)

In response, the *Canons* acknowledge that even those effectually called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit are not fully free from the remnants of sin and the flesh (V.1). This shared recognition of the ongoing struggle with sin forms a theological common ground between Reformed and Arminian soteriologies.

The *Canons of Dort* begin their treatment of perseverance not with abstract metaphysical claims but with a robust theological realism – what might be called an ecumenically ‘catholic’ anthropology (Hyde n.d.). Believers, although genuinely renewed, remain engaged in a constant struggle against the power of sin. This realism excludes any form of perfectionism with respect to human volition or sanctification. Thus, the *Canons* implicitly affirm a concern voiced in the Fifth Article of the *Remonstrance*, which concedes that believers, if left to their own strength, are incapable of persevering in a state of grace (V.3). Where the two traditions

diverge is in their assessment of divine agency: the *Canons* locate the believer's assurance not in human strength, but in the faithfulness and preserving power of God.

This theological trajectory finds resonance in the Lutheran Confessions. The *Augsburg Confession* (1530), while superficially at odds with the *Canons of Dort* in its condemnation of the Anabaptist claim that the justified cannot lose the Spirit of God (see Davis 1991:216), in fact shares the *Canons'* rejection of perfectionism (art. XII). The Confession states:

They condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that men once justified can lose the Spirit of God, and do contend that some men may attain to such a perfection in this life that they cannot sin. (Schaff 1882a:15)

The Lutheran objection lies not in the affirmation of assurance per se, but in the association of that assurance with a doctrine of moral perfection and the resultant erosion of justification by faith alone. Likewise, the *Formula of Concord* (1584) extols the doctrine of election as 'the most wholesome and comforting doctrine', assuring believers that they have been chosen 'by mere grace, without any merit of our own, in Christ to eternal life' (Schaff 1882c:170). Within Lutheranism, then, the certainty of salvation is rejected when grounded in human ability but affirmed when grounded in divine grace, a position fundamentally consistent with the *Canons of Dort*.

From a broader Protestant perspective, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints holds considerable pastoral value. The *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England (1571) affirm that 'the godly consideration of our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons' (Schaff 1882f:498). It should be noted, however, that the British delegation, seeking to avoid the narrower formulation of the doctrine of perseverance, which allows for the possibility that the non-elect may arrive at a regenerated state and that those with temporary faith may ultimately fall into apostasy, had to be satisfied with the inclusion of Rejection of Errors III and VII in the *Canons of Dort* (Collier 2018:84–92).¹⁹ Nevertheless, it remains the case that this narrower doctrine of perseverance offers genuine pastoral comfort. Such comfort is not abstract but made experientially present through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the mortification of the flesh. The *Formula of Concord* (Schaff 1882c:XI.12) likewise speaks of the 'most sweet consolation' believers receive upon knowing they are secure in Christ and that no external force can remove them from his hand.

Similarly, the *Canons of Dort* emphasise that the assurance of perseverance does not rest upon private revelation but upon the trustworthy promises of God (see Reformed Church in America 2011:V.2.5).²⁰ Yet they do not neglect the

¹⁹Had the British delegation succeeded in arguing for a broader perspective on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, as also taught in Augustine's thought, the *Canons of Dort* would have been more ecumenical. Here we see the limitations of the ecumenical scope of this great document.

²⁰Against the Council Fathers 1547:Chapter XII and canon XVI.

experiential dimension of assurance, teaching that it is accompanied by the presence of the 'marks peculiar to God's children' (Venema 2019:44–45).²¹ Assurance, then, is not divorced from sanctification, but is recognised through it. In this way, the *Canons* maintain a balance between doctrinal assurance and ethical exhortation.

The *Council of Trent*, in contrast, explicitly warns against the presumption of absolute certainty in the matter of perseverance. It cautions:

Let no one herein promise himself any thing as certain with an absolute certainty. (VI.13)

For Trent, such confidence threatens to undermine the believer's dependence on divine grace and the seriousness of spiritual warfare against the flesh, the world and the devil. However, the *Canons of Dort* exhibit a surprising congruence with Trent on this point. They, too, warn believers not to become complacent, urging continual watchfulness and prayer to avoid being overcome by sin, the world and Satan (V.2). To the accusation that the doctrine of perseverance might foster moral laxity, the *Canons* responds that this assurance, rightly understood, leads not to indolence but to increased godliness, prayer and obedience (see Barrett 2011:223–252).²² It cites biblical saints who, while certain of God's preserving grace, remained steadfast in spiritual discipline.

While the *Canons of Dort* reject the sacrament of penance as a means of recovering grace (see Council Fathers 1547:canon XXIX), they do affirm the role of the sacraments generally as instrumental in the believer's perseverance (Reformed Church in America 2011:V.14). Thus, despite polemical distance, a certain theological affinity with Trent can be discerned.²³

The theology of Thomas Aquinas also anticipates many of the theological concerns raised by the *Canons*. Aquinas treats perseverance as a distinct virtue, associated with temperance and fortitude, and acknowledges that it requires not only habitual grace but also the gratuitous assistance of God (see Aquinas 1913–1942:II–II.137.1). He writes: Perseverance 'needs not only habitual grace, but also the gratuitous help of God sustaining man in good until the end of life' (Aquinas 1913–1942:II–II.137.4). Aquinas distinguishes between the internal habitus of grace and the additional divine aid necessary to persevere (see Aquinas 1913–1942:I–II.109.9–10). Left to its own strength, even when regenerated, the human will is insufficient. It is only through the continuous

²¹In his study, Venema differentiates between the objective and the subjective grounds for the assurance of salvation. The first consists of God's unchangeable purpose of election, Christ's effective redemption, and the efficacious application of its benefits by the Holy Spirit, whereas the latter, which serve only a subordinate role, consist of the 'unmistakable fruits of election' (e.g. true faith in Christ, childlike fear of God, godly sorrow for sins, hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc.). As in later Calvinism or Puritanism, the objective grounds offer a possibility for growth in assurance.

²²On the Canon of Dort's inspiration of true piety, Barrett has provided an explanation.

²³Although the Council of Trent issued anathemas against key aspects of the Protestant doctrine of salvation, the *Canons of Dort* did not reciprocate by explicitly condemning Roman Catholic soteriology. While the *Canons* firmly rejected Pelagianism in all its forms, they did not directly repudiate the Roman Catholic understanding of grace.

sustaining action of divine grace that perseverance is made possible.

In this respect, the *Canons* and Aquinas exhibit theological convergence. The *Canons* state that those who are truly converted, if left to their own strength, 'could not persevere in a state of grace'; rather, it is God who 'powerfully preserves them to the end' (V.3). The apparent difference between Aquinas and the *Canons* may lie more in terminology than in substance. What Aquinas calls 'the gratuitous help of God', the *Canons* calls 'the faithfulness of God'. Both traditions affirm that final perseverance depends not on autonomous human effort but on the sustaining initiative of divine grace.

Conclusion

Rather than functioning solely as an instrument of theological division, the *Canons of Dort* can be interpreted as a document with ecumenical potential. When the doctrine of election is approached not merely from the perspective of divine decree but through the lens of divine grace, a more fruitful path emerges, particularly in relation to Christian unity. By situating election within the locus of soteriology, as the *Canons* do, the close relationship between election and the proclamation of the gospel to all people is upheld. The choice to adopt an infralapsarian framework, rather than affirming supralapsarianism, further reflects a moderate and inclusive stance, one that fosters dialogue rather than dogmatic rigidity.

Despite a pronounced divergence between the *Canons* and the Arminian Articles regarding the *cause* of election, both traditions share a common affirmation of its *goal*: the perseverance and obedience of faith, brought about by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Within the Reformed tradition, the *Canons of Dort* serve not only as a theological bridge between Calvin and later Reformed Orthodoxy but also as a mediating voice, especially through their articulation of *electio in Christo*. This Christocentric framing of election offers a point of contact with the Lutheran understanding, potentially bridging confessional differences regarding divine election.

In addressing the Arminian emphasis on universal grace, the *Canons* could have adopted a narrowly polemical stance by underscoring the exclusivity of Christ's death. Yet, they deliberately chose a more nuanced approach: affirming both the universal sufficiency and the particular efficacy of Christ's atonement. While the Arminian Articles emphasise the necessity of faith for the reception of forgiveness, thus acknowledging a form of particularity, the *Canons* locate particularity in divine election. Despite this divergence in emphasis, both confessions affirm that not all benefit from Christ's death in the same way. In this respect, the *Canons* resonate with the medieval Catholic tradition exemplified by Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, which upheld the classical distinction between the universal sufficiency and the particular efficacy of Christ's work. The *Canons* also demonstrate a sophisticated integration of both Anselm's satisfaction theory and the penal substitution model within their doctrine of atonement.

Consistent with the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel, the *Canons of Dort*, in line with broader Reformed theology, present the doctrine of sin not as an endpoint, but as a necessary prelude to soteriology. Their more nuanced articulation of human corruption, especially when compared to Calvin's treatment, reveals a deliberate engagement with Arminian concerns. Likewise, the Arminian assertion of the resistibility of grace is carefully considered: while the *Canons* affirm that internal, regenerating grace is efficacious and therefore cannot be ultimately resisted, they nonetheless acknowledge that the external call and its associated gifts can be resisted. In this context, the term *efficacious grace* is arguably preferable to *irresistible grace*, although the latter can still be theologically appropriate if understood within a paradigm of divine love, rather than coercion.

On the doctrine of perseverance, the *Canons* closely align with the Lutheran confessional tradition in affirming that believers cannot attain assurance of salvation by their own strength. However, both traditions place full confidence in the faithfulness of divine grace as the source of that assurance. In concert with the *Formula of Concord* and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the *Canons* describe the doctrine of perseverance as a 'well-founded consolation' for true believers. Yet this assurance is never presented as a licence for spiritual complacency. The inclusion of the 'true marks' of election underscores the inseparability of assurance and sanctification; perseverance is to be accompanied by vigilance, prayer and moral exertion.

Despite their polemical posture against the *Council of Trent*, the *Canons* display an awareness of and sensitivity to some of Trent's pastoral concerns, especially the danger of presumption and the necessity of spiritual struggle. In this regard, the *Canons* share unexpected conceptual affinities with Aquinas's teaching on perseverance. Like Aquinas, who taught that perseverance requires not only habitual grace but also the gratuitous and sustaining help of God, the *Canons* emphasise that believers, left to themselves, cannot persevere. It is the divine faithfulness that ensures their preservation to the end. While differences in terminology remain, the substantive theological convergence between the *Canons* and aspects of Catholic thought, especially as mediated through figures like Aquinas, opens possibilities for constructive ecumenical engagement.

In sum, the *Canons of Dort*, while forged in the context of confessional controversy, offer more than polemic. When read with theological generosity and historical sensitivity, they reveal a deep pastoral concern, a nuanced soteriology and a surprising ecumenical potential.

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