

“THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION IN
THE CANONS OF DORT:
 A COMMEMORATIVE ESSAY” (PART ONE)¹

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to his study of the doctrine of divine election, G. C. Berkouwer warns against a speculative approach that undermines the believer’s assurance of salvation. Such an approach conflicts with the consistent correlation in Scripture between God’s purpose of election in Christ and the certainty of salvation that springs from the believer’s confidence in God’s promises of salvation through faith in Christ:

In Scripture the certainty of salvation is never threatened or cast in shadows because of the fact of election. Rather, we always read of the joy of God’s election and of election as the profound, unassailable and strong foundation for man’s salvation, both for time and eternity. Election functions nowhere as a background to the order of salvation, a background that creates uncertainty, or as a shadow of the *deus absconditus* [hidden God] over the revelation of the *deus revelatus* [revealed God]. On the contrary, we hear with it a hymn of praise and gratitude for the foundation of salvation. Election does not loom as a problem, as an unbearable tension. It

1. The subtitle of my article reflects the fact that this year of our Lord, 2018, marks the 400th anniversary of the convening of the Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, the Netherlands, to settle the ongoing controversy in the Dutch churches regarding the teaching of Arminius and his followers on the topic of election. Due to the article’s length, I have divided it into two parts, the first of which is included in this issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* and the second of which will be published in the next issue. For a treatment of the recognition of the Canons as a confessional standard, see Donald Sinnema, “The Canons of Dordt: From Judgment on Arminianism to Confessional Standard,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan & Fred van Lieburg, 313-33. For a comprehensive treatment of the Scriptural basis for the Canons’ teaching, see David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, eds., *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 30-38. For popular treatments of the Canons, see Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1994, 2011); James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); and Timothy F. George, *Amazing Grace: God’s Initiative—Our Response* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2002).

completely lacks those aspects, and we meet election in emphatically doxological and soteriological contexts....²

Contrary to the popular opinion that God's purpose of election in Christ inevitably creates doubt and uncertainty regarding God's grace, Berkouwer emphasizes that, in its Scriptural presentation, it is always the occasion for magnifying God's grace and underscoring the confidence that believers may have in his unfailing mercy.

The question that I propose to address in this essay is whether or not the Canons of Dort, which present a consensus view of the Reformed churches' understanding of election, maintain this connection between election and the assurance of salvation. One of the explicit themes in the Canons is the comfort that the church of Jesus Christ should derive from the confession of God's sovereign and gracious election of his people in Christ. For example, in the important conclusion to the Canons, which offers a summary of "false accusations" against the Reformed understanding of election, ministers of the gospel of Christ are encouraged to teach the doctrine of election "with a view to the glory of God's name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls."³ The inclusion of this encouragement in the conclusion of the Canons witnesses to the authors' desire to emphasize the comfort afforded by the Scriptural doctrine of election. The language of the conclusion also aims to refute the accusation of the Arminian party within the Dutch Reformed churches that the doctrine of unconditional election either undermines the believer's assurance of salvation or lends support to a careless presumption that is incompatible with the Scripture's teaching.

Since the time of the codification of the Reformed doctrine of election in the Canons of Dort, the question of the relation between election and the assurance of salvation has frequently arisen in debates between Reformed and Arminian theologians. These debates underscore the importance of a close study of the way the Canons address the issue of assurance. The Canons of Dort represent the most fulsome statement of the historic teaching of the Reformed churches on the topic of election, and therefore provide the most definitive statement of how election and the certainty of salvation are interrelated. Moreover, since the question of the assurance of salvation has significant pastoral implications, the position of the Canons is particularly relevant to the way Reformed pastors minister the gospel. They provide important instruction regarding how ministers of the gospel should encourage those who may struggle with doubts regarding their election and salvation. And they also provide pastoral advice regarding the difference between the cultivation of a proper confidence in the gospel promise of salvation in Christ and the inappropriate presumption of salvation by those whose profession of faith is belied by their willful continuance in sin and disobedience.

2. *Divine Election*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 18.

3. "Conclusion: Rejection of False Accusations," in *The Good Confession: Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, revised classroom ed. (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2013 [1991]), 178 (emphasis mine). The citations from the Canons throughout this essay are taken from this volume.

In order to treat the Canons' teaching of the question of the assurance of salvation, the first part of my essay will begin with a fairly extensive overview of the debates regarding this question. This overview will begin with a summary of the Arminian party's view of assurance prior to and at the time of the convening of the Synod in 1618. It will also address more recent discussions of the relation between election and salvation in Reformed theology that are relevant to an appraisal of the view set forth in the Canons. After providing this overview and background for a consideration of the Canons of Dort, the second part of my study, which will be published in the next issue of the journal, will consist of a review and summary of the position of the Canons on the topic of the assurance of salvation. Then, in the final section, I will offer some concluding reflections regarding the Canons' position on the assurance of election and salvation.

1. An Overview of Debates Regarding the Assurance Of Election and Salvation in Reformed Theology

At the time of the writing of the Canons of Dort, as well as in the subsequent history of reflection upon its teaching, a number of recurring debates have focused upon alleged problems inherent in the Reformed doctrine of election that undermine the believer's ability to obtain assurance. In the writings of Arminius and his followers, the Remonstrants, accusations against the Reformed view included the claim that the doctrine of sovereign, unconditional election inevitably compromised the ability of believers to be confident of God's gracious disposition toward them in Christ.⁴ In the far-reaching revision of the traditional Reformed doctrine of election associated with the name of Karl Barth, one of the principal motives impelling Barth's revision was the conviction that the older view of Calvin and the Canons of Dort inevitably left believers with no sure basis for the assurance of God's electing favor toward them in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, in more recent discussions of the Reformed view of election, a school of thought influenced by the writings of R. T. Kendall has argued that later Calvinism diverged from Calvin himself, when it taught a doctrine of "limited" or definite atonement that raised questions regarding the veracity of the universal call of the gospel and its accompanying promise of God's saving mercy toward all who believe. According to this school of thought, the doctrine of definite atonement compelled believers to appeal to their faith experience, and the good works that spring from faith, to ascertain whether or not they were elect persons for whom Christ's atoning death was accomplished.

4. Throughout this article, I will often use the term "Remonstrants" to refer to advocates of Arminius' teaching on election. The name "Remonstrants" derives from their official appeal to the States-General of the Netherlands, *The Remonstrance of 1610* (Latin: *Articuli Arminiani sive Remonstrantia*). In their *Remonstrance*, the followers of Arminius presented his views in five points of doctrine, which became the occasion for the Synod of Dort's adoption of five main points of doctrine, each of which provides a summary of the Reformed view and a rejection of the errors of the Remonstrants. For the original Dutch and Latin versions of the *Remonstrance*, see Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, vol. 3: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeeds* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 545-49.

Before we turn to the teaching of the Canons, accordingly, we need to consider these debates and the questions that they pose regarding their teaching on the topic of assurance. While a consideration of these debates must not be allowed to skew our interpretation of the Canons, it will provide a helpful summary of older and more recent critical assessments of their teaching.

1.1. Arminius and the Remonstrants on Assurance

Though it is not often adequately recognized, in the controversy that preceded the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618, the topic of assurance played an important role in Arminius' formulation of the doctrine of election and dissent from the prevalent Reformed doctrine.⁵ Furthermore, in the course of the controversy, the Remonstrant or Arminian party presented their opinions regarding the traditional Reformed view in a way that also underscored the problems this view allegedly creates for the believer's ability to obtain an appropriate assurance of salvation and God's electing favor.

1.1.1. Arminius' Doctrine of Conditional Predestination

Although Arminius already opposed the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election during his years of service as a pastor in Amsterdam, his most important writings on the topic of election were written after his appointment to succeed Junius as professor of theology in Leiden. Prior to his death in 1609, Arminius wrote a number of works thoroughly stating his view, among which his *Public Disputations* and *Declaration of Sentiments* offer perhaps the most important summary of his teaching.⁶ Since the latter provides a comprehensive and mature statement of Arminius' doctrine of predestination, my consideration of Arminius' position will begin with his argument in this work.

5. Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182, describe the topic of assurance as a "point of departure" for Arminius' formulation of an alternative doctrine of election to the prevalent Reformed understanding.

6. *Public Disputations*, in *The Works of James Arminius* [hereafter: WJA], trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (London: 1825, 1828, 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:80-312; and *Declaration of Sentiments of Arminius, delivered before the States of Holland*, in WJA 2:580-732. For helpful summaries of Arminius' teaching, including the history of the Arminian controversy, see Carl Bang, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); P. Y. De Jong, ed., *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort 1618-1619* (2nd ed.; Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968 [2008]); Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*; Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603-1609* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007); and Richard A. Muller, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius' Gambit and the Reformed Response" in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 2:251-78.

In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, Arminius opens with an extended critique of both supralapsarian and infralapsarian formulations of the predestination doctrine among his Reformed contemporaries.⁷ Though he devotes less attention to the infralapsarian view, he judges it liable to the same objections he raised against the supralapsarian view.⁸ The principal complaint Arminius brings against the Reformed view is that God's decree is viewed as a single, absolute decree whose various aspects (creation, the fall into sin, the election of some, the non-election of others, etc.), whether ordered in a supralapsarian or infralapsarian manner, must necessarily come to pass. In Arminius' estimation, this view of God's decree makes God the author of Adam's fall into sin and also necessitates the sins of all those whom he does not elect to save. Accordingly, the Reformed insistence that God's decree of election is unconditional inevitably imperils the biblical doctrine of God's perfect goodness and justice.

Rather than viewing God's decree as a single, absolute decree with several logically distinguishable components, Arminius distinguishes four decrees within God's eternal mind and counsel.

I. The first absolute decree of God concerning the salvation of sinful man, is that by which he decreed to appoint his Son Jesus Christ for a Mediator, Redeemer, Saviour, Priest and King, who might destroy sin by his own death, might by his obedience obtain the salvation which had been lost, and might communicate it by his own virtue.

II. The second precise and absolute decree of God, is that in which he decreed to receive into favour those who repent and believe, and, in Christ, for His sake and through Him, to effect the salvation of such penitents and believers as persevered to the end; but to leave in sin and under wrath all impenitent persons and unbelievers, and to damn them as aliens from Christ.

III. The third divine decree is that by which God decreed to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means which were necessary for repentance and faith; and to have such administration instituted (1) according

7. Supralapsarianism views God's decree to elect or reprobate as "above" (*supra*) or logically prior to his decree to permit the fall (*lapsus*), whereas infralapsarianism views God's decree to elect or reprobate as "below" (*infra*) or logically subsequent to his decree to permit the fall. In the supralapsarian position, the objects of God's decree are conceived as uncreated and unfallen sinners (*homo creabilis et labilis*). In the infralapsarian position, the objects of God's decree are conceived as created and fallen creatures (*homo creatus et lapsus*). Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 140, note that Arminius never uses the words "predestine," "elect," or "reprobate" in his description of God's decrees in his *Declaration of Sentiments*. In their representation of Arminius' "order of God's decrees" (*ordo decretorum Dei*), the order is as follows: (1) to create; (2) to permit the fall; (3) to appoint Christ as the foundation of election to redeem; (4) to save, in Christ, (the class of) penitent believers, and condemn unbelievers; (5) to provide means (grace) for repentance and faith; and (5) to save or condemn single, specific individuals foreknown to believe or not believe..

8. For a summary of these objections, see Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 111-32.

to the Divine Wisdom, by which God knows what is proper and becoming both to his mercy and his severity, and (2) according to Divine Justice, by which He is prepared to adopt whatever his wisdom may prescribe and to put it in execution.

IV. To these succeeds the fourth decree, by which God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and, — according to the before-described administration of those means which are suitable and proper for conversion and faith; and, by which foreknowledge, he likewise knew those who would not believe and persevere.⁹

Arminius calls the first two decrees “absolute,” because both of them are antecedent to, and independent of, anything that transpires within the order of creation in general and the acts of human creatures in particular. These two decrees express God’s eternal mind and will respecting the salvation of all those who believe in Jesus Christ, whom God appointed as Mediator and Savior. While the third and fourth of these decrees are antecedent expressions of God’s eternal mind and will respecting the salvation of fallen sinners, Arminius does not call them “absolute” because they depend for their efficacy upon the free response of fallen sinners to the gospel offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. These decrees, though antecedent in the mind and will of God, are dependent upon, and effectual only in consequence of, what God eternally foreknew fallen sinners would freely do in response to the gospel call. The efficacy of these decrees in respect to the salvation of fallen human beings ultimately depends upon what they freely will to do (or not do) in response to God’s good will toward them.

In his definition of the first of God’s decrees, Arminius clearly states that it expresses God’s gracious intention to grant salvation to “sinful man” and to appoint his Son as the Savior. By doing so, Arminius expresses his agreement with his infralapsarian contemporaries that God’s decree of election contemplates human beings in their fallen condition.¹⁰ However, in sharp contrast with the Reformed view, Arminius defines this decree as an indefinite will of God to provide for the salvation of “sinful man.” For Arminius, God’s absolute will to make salvation available in Christ does not contemplate any specific persons whom God determines to save, but rather the whole of the fallen human race. The second absolute decree of God focuses upon how sinful human beings can come to be saved upon the basis of Christ’s work as Mediator. Consistent with the first absolute decree of God, this second decree affirms

9. *Declaration of Sentiments*, in *WJA*, 1:653-54.

10. Muller, “Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice,” 257. Muller points out that, in his formulation of this first, absolute decree of God, Arminius “quite distinct from the Reformed ... tends to subordinate the Son to the decree of the Father. In his Christology, in a parallel fashion, he emphasizes the subordination of the Son in the order of the Persons. The result is that the second person of the Trinity is, in the Arminian system, subordinate to the decree and not, as the Reformed insist, at the same time electing God and elected or anointed Mediator” (257-58).

that salvation depends upon the work of Christ. However, this decree adds that the efficacy of Christ's saving work depends upon the persevering faith and repentance with which some respond to God's general offer of salvation in Christ. Though it is not expressly stated by Arminius, the implication is that God wills to save those whom he foreknows will respond properly to the gracious offer of the gospel. Because those who are saved or not saved are defined in general terms—"such penitents and believers as persevered ... all impenitent persons and unbelievers"—this decree grants a certain priority to the human will in deciding to embrace the gospel offer.¹¹

In his statement of God's third and fourth decrees, Arminius continues to speak of God's antecedent mind and will in respect to fallen human beings in general. However, he now identifies God's will to employ particular means to communicate his grace to those who are saved through faith in Christ. If God's absolute decrees are to become effectual for the salvation of "sinful man," he must appoint means necessary to this end. God's third decree identifies the specific means of grace (principally, the church's preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments) that stipulate the "conditions" required for fallen sinners to be saved. In order for sinners to be saved, they must believe in Christ and repent. And in order for sinners to believe in Christ and repent, they must hear the gospel offer of salvation with its call to faith and repentance. Arminius' fourth decree clearly draws out the implications for the doctrine of predestination from the preceding three decrees. Though God wills absolutely and antecedently to save "sinful man" in general, he wills relatively and consequently to save only those particular persons whom he foreknew would believe and to damn those whom he foreknew would not.¹² The basis for God's decree to save and damn "certain particular persons" is his foreknowledge of the way these persons would respond. Since this decree is based upon God's foreknowledge of those persons who would meet the "conditions" (faith and repentance) required for actual salvation, Arminius' doctrine of predestination is commonly termed a doctrine of "conditional predestination."¹³

1.1.2. True Assurance: Neither False "Security" nor "Hopelessness"

According to Arminius, the doctrine of conditional predestination has important and salutary implications for the believer's cultivation of a true assurance of election and salvation. However, before we treat Arminius' identification of the grounds for such assurance within the framework of his conditional predestinarianism, a few

11. "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice," 258: "From a Reformed point of view, such teaching has a decidedly Pelagian tendency inasmuch as it raises in eternity the issue of the priority of human choice."

12. Muller, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice," 259: "The antecedent will to save is juxtaposed with a consequent will to save particular human beings, and the effective will of God, therefore, rests on the foreknowledge of a future contingency."

13. The language, "conditional predestination," is Stanglin's (*Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 84): "The crucial difference between Arminius's doctrine of predestination and that of most of his Reformed contemporaries was his belief that predestination is conditional on a person's free acceptance or rejection of God's saving grace, that is, one's faith or unbelief."

comments are in order on the way he distinguishes such assurance from two problematic alternatives: first, a false “security” or careless presumption regarding election and salvation; and second, a “hopelessness” or despair regarding election and salvation. In Arminius’ estimation, these two problematic alternatives to true assurance are the undesirable consequences of the traditional Reformed view of unconditional election.

Arminius offers a comprehensive account of these two problems of assurance in his *Declaration of Sentiments*. After appealing to the words of the author of Hebrews—“He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”—Arminius offers a definition of false “security” and of “despair”:

Security [Latin: *securitas*; Dutch: *sorgloosheyd*, “carelessness”] operates, when a man persuades himself, that, how inattentive soever he may be to the worship of God, he will not be damned, but will obtain salvation. Despair [Latin: *desperatio*; Dutch, *wanhoop*, “hopelessness”] is in operation, when a person entertains a persuasion, that, whatever degree of reverence he may evince towards God, he will not receive any remuneration. In what human mind soever either of these pests is fostered, it is impossible that any true and proper worship of God can there reside.—Now both of them are overturned by the words of the Apostle: For if a man firmly believes, “that God will bestow eternal life on those alone who seek him but that he will inflict on the rest death eternal,” he can on no account indulge himself in security. And if he likewise believes, that “God is truly a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him,” by applying himself to the search he will not be in danger of falling into despair.¹⁴

According to Arminius, it is not difficult to ascertain why the traditional Reformed doctrine of unconditional election gives birth either to false security regarding one’s election and salvation or to hopelessness and despair.

On the one hand, the doctrine of unconditional election encourages false security or carelessness. When sinners are encouraged to believe that God’s electing grace does not depend upon their response to the conditions set forth in the gospel call (faith and repentance), there is no adequate basis for urgently summoning them to seek after God and believe that he is a rewarder of those who do so. Since faith and repentance are granted efficaciously by God to those whom he unconditionally elects to save (and likewise not granted to those whom God reprobates), there is nothing the elect can fail to do and, as a consequence, fall out of God’s favor and grace. Nor is there anything the reprobate can do to find favor with God. According to the Reformed view of unconditional election, the gospel call is unfailingly efficacious in the case of the elect, however they conduct themselves, and likewise unfailingly inefficacious in the case of the reprobate, however they conduct themselves.

14. *Declaration of Sentiments*, in *WJA*, 1.637-38.

Furthermore, when the doctrine of election includes the promise of God's preservation of the elect, the problem of a false security is only aggravated. The assurance of salvation that believers are encouraged to have in God's electing, unconditional grace cannot be nullified by the carelessness of believers who falsely presume their election. If this were not enough to encourage carelessness and false security, the Reformed interpretation of Romans 7 compounds the problem further. When believers are assured of their preservation by God, they are also told that they may enjoy this assurance, even though they make little or no progress in holiness. Even though their lives are still dominated by sin and exhibit minimal holiness, according to the Reformed interpretation of Romans 7, they are still encouraged to be assured of their salvation.¹⁵ Therefore, Arminius argues that the Reformed doctrines of unconditional election, the perseverance of the saints, and the continued dominance of sin in the lives of the elect, conspire together to produce a false, careless assurance of election and salvation. In a succinct summary of Arminius' opposition to a false security, Stanglin observes that "the normalcy of sin in the Christian life, along with the doctrines of unconditional election and eternal security, could foster an attitude of 'saved if you do; saved if you don't.'" ¹⁶

Ironically, Arminius argues that the Reformed view of unconditional election also fosters despair regarding the assurance of election and salvation. When Reformed theologians, including Calvin, maintain that true faith invariably includes the elements of knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*), they unwittingly undermine the confidence of believers who may know and give their consent to the gospel promise of salvation in Jesus Christ, but who nonetheless lack the conviction of their own salvation.¹⁷ The fact that such believers lack the kind of assurance that belongs to true faith serves to unsettle them, and raises questions about the veracity of their faith. Since they do not experience full assurance, they are left to conclude that their profession of faith is not genuine and futile. For this reason, Arminius opposed the insistence that trust belongs essentially to true faith, while acknowledging that it ought ordinarily to be a fruit produced by true faith.¹⁸ Believers should be encouraged to cultivate the assurance of salvation, but such assurance cannot flourish in the context of the traditional Reformed view. In the Reformed view, it is always possible that professing believers are self-deceived,

15. Cf. *The Seventh Chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, in *WJA* 2:659: "For nothing can be imagined more noxious to true morality than to assert, that 'it is a property of the regenerate *not to do the good which they would, and to do the evil which they would not;*' Because it necessarily follows from this, that those person flatter themselves in their sins, who, which sinning, feel that they do so with a reluctant conscience with a will that offered some resistance."

16. Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 181.

17. John Calvin's definition of true faith in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 3.2.7) identifies assurance as one of its essential aspects: "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

18. *WJA*, 1:176-77; Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 98-100.

mistakenly thinking that their faith is genuine, when it may possibly only be a temporary, apparent faith.¹⁹ When believers struggle with doubts about their salvation, the doctrine of unconditional election and reprobation can only further aggravate their attempts to gain assurance.

For when they [those who work out their salvation “with fear and trembling”] are taught, that the grace of God (which is really necessary to the performance of the least portion of good,) is denied to the majority of mankind, according to an absolute and peremptory decree of God,—and that such grace is denied because, by a preceding decree equally absolute, God has determined not to confer salvation on them but damnation;—when they are thus taught, it is scarcely possible for any other result to ensue, than that the individual who cannot even with great difficulty work a persuasion within himself of his being elected, should soon consider himself included in the number of the reprobate.²⁰

1.1.3. The *a priori* and *a posteriori* Grounds of Assurance

Now that we have offered a summary of Arminius’ doctrine of conditional election, as well as an account of his critical assessment of two problematic views that are encouraged by the Reformed view of unconditional election, we are in a position to consider Arminius’ positive account of the grounds for a true and proper assurance of salvation. For Arminius, these grounds may be distinguished, as was true in the theology of his Reformed contemporaries, into two types. The first or *a priori* grounds for assurance focus upon the objective foundations of salvation in the gracious will and purpose of God to save the elect in Christ. The second or *a posteriori* grounds for assurance focus upon the subjective appropriation of the gospel promises in Christ by way of faith. Like his Reformed contemporaries, Arminius recognized that there is a difference between the objective and subjective grounds of assurance. The former answer the question, what is the foundation of what true faith believes regarding God’s favor? And the latter answer the question, what are the marks that confirm the genuineness of the act of faith itself? In his fine study of Arminius’ doctrine of assurance, Stanglin offers a helpful explanation of these two types of grounds for the assurance of salvation in Arminius’ theology particularly, and in Reformed theology more generally:

From this angle [the *a priori* grounds of assurance], the inquirer seeks assurance by examining the very foundation of salvation. Instead of gathering evidence from human conditions, the seeker considers how the doctrine of God—especially his power and will—impacts the question of

19. Cf. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 183-87.

20. *Declaration of Sentiments*, WJA 1:632. Cf. Stanglin and McCall, *James Arminius*, 179: “... such people might conclude that they are unconditionally reprobate, leading to an inescapable despair that provides no hope of salvation, and giving little reason for them to attempt to be saved. As the saying goes, ‘Damned if you do; damned if you don’t.’”

assurance. We shall refer to this line of examination as the *a priori* epistemological question; it is objective and external to the inquirer.... From the latter perspective, the inquirer searches for signs or proofs in his own life in order that he might discover his ontological status before God. This query may be phrased, "Is there any evidence in my Christian life that demonstrates my actual salvation?" We shall refer to this line of examination as the *a posteriori* epistemological question; it is subjective and internal to the inquirer.²¹

Regarding the first category of grounds for assurance, Arminius starts from the conviction that the doctrine of unconditional election, especially in its supralapsarian formulation, undermines the *a priori* foundation for assurance in God's love for all fallen sinners in Christ. The Reformed view of God's will or good pleasure (*benepiacitum*) does not represent God's will as antecedently and absolutely one of love and good will toward all sinners. Nor does it affirm God's intention in Christ to provide for the salvation of all sinners who are sincerely summoned to believe in him in order to be saved. By contrast, Arminius begins his formulation of God's will and purpose with respect to salvation by emphasizing God's antecedent and absolute will to save all sinners, and to provide for their salvation through the work of Christ on their behalf. Upon the basis of Arminius' exposition of these general, absolute, and antecedent expressions of God's will, we are given a solid basis for assuring all recipients of the gospel call that God desires their salvation in Christ and will grant them all that is needed in order for them to respond appropriately in the way of faith and obedience. While Arminius acknowledges that God's consequent will involves his goodpleasure to save only those specific persons who persistently believe the gospel promise, all recipients of the gospel have good *a priori* grounds for believing that God is eager to receive and reward all those who search after him.

With respect to the *a posteriori* grounds for assurance, Arminius' position is similar to that of his Reformed contemporaries.²² In Arminius' view, there are four closely related ways the work of God's grace are confirmed in the experience of believers. The first of these grounds is the believer's awareness or "sense of faith" (*sensus fidei*). Because God's election in Christ depends upon the condition of foreseen faith, believers may derive assurance from their own act of faith in response to the gospel call.²³ The presence of true faith is thus among the foremost *a posteriori* evidences of election and salvation. In addition to this sense of faith, believers may also derive assurance from the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (*internum testimonium Spiritus sancti*), when the Spirit bears witness in our hearts that we are God's adopted children (Rom. 8:15-16). Furthermore, since true faith always produces in believers a struggle against the flesh and a desire to do good

21. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 197.

22. For a more extensive treatment of these grounds in Arminius' theology, see Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 198-208.

23. *Nine Questions*, WJA, 2:67: "Since God promises eternal life to all who believe in Christ, it is impossible for him who believes, and who knows that he believes, to doubt of his own salvation."

works, these works provide further confirmation of the genuineness of our faith. These four *a posteriori* grounds for assurance—the awareness of faith, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, the struggle against the flesh, and the desire to do good works—cumulatively bear witness to the genuineness of the believer’s faith, and comprise the occasion for what is often termed the “practical syllogism” (*sylogismus practicus*).²⁴ Though the so-called “practical syllogism” was a commonplace among Reformed theologians, it was not typically presented in the form of a strict syllogism (major premise: God saves those who believe; minor premise: I believe; conclusion: therefore, I am one whom God has saved).²⁵ For Arminius, the practical syllogism is an important ground for the believer’s assurance of salvation. While the *a priori* grounds for assurance lay a more basic foundation for assurance in the antecedent and absolute love of God in Christ for all sinners, the practical syllogism enables believers to be confident of their salvation by observing their faith and its fruits.²⁶

Based upon these *a priori* and *a posteriori* grounds, Arminius claims that believers may have a true assurance of salvation. However, Arminius does not affirm that believers may have a full assurance that they will remain faithful to the end. While he expresses some ambivalence in his *Declaration of Sentiments* regarding whether or not believers may be assured of their preservation in the way of faith, he elsewhere denies that they can have such assurance.²⁷ Because no one “can believe that future sins will also be remitted to him, unless he knows that he will believe to the end,” it is not possible for anyone to have full assurance regarding their future preservation.²⁸ To affirm that believers may be assured of their preservation to the end is to encourage a false security, which is “directly opposed to the most salutary fear by which we are commanded to work out our salvation, and which is exceedingly necessary in this place of temptations.”²⁹ Such assurance of future preservation only encourages carelessness and presumption.

24. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 205: “In the context of the assurance of salvation, early Reformed orthodoxy employed the *sylogismus practicus*. This practical syllogism simply and explicitly works out the relationship between the testimonies of salvation and the assurance of salvation itself in a logical manner.”

25. Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Word of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 249: “If then, the term [practical syllogism] is taken strictly as indicating only those formulations of assurance made in the form of a syllogism, it is rather rarely found before the seventeenth century, and Calvin did not employ it; if, however, the term is taken loosely, as it often appears to be used in the scholarship, as referring to resolution to the question of assurance grounded on evidences of salvation in the human subject, it is a rather frequent occurrence in early modern Reformed thought....”

26. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 232.

27. *Declaration of Sentiments*, WJA, 1:665-66.

28. *Nine Questions*, in WJA, 2:70. Bangs succinctly captures the implications of Arminius’ view (*Arminius*, 348): “... if there is no present assurance of final salvation, it is because there is the possibility of falling from grace.”

29. *Certain Articles*, WJA, 2:726.

1.1.4. Assurance in the Opinions of the Remonstrants

In the period between Arminius' death in 1609 and the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618, the controversy regarding the doctrine of election intensified in the Dutch Reformed Church. In the course of the controversy, the followers of Arminius presented their opinions in several important documents. For our purpose, the two most important documents that express the position of the Arminian party are *The Remonstrance of 1610* and the *The Opinions of the Remonstrants* (1618).³⁰ The first of these documents was written not long after Arminius' death, and was presented by defenders of Arminius' views in the form of a petition to the political authorities to judge the orthodoxy of their views. The second of these documents was reluctantly prepared by the Remonstrants, at the request of the Synod of Dort, as a statement of their views on the disputed points regarding the doctrine of election. In both of these documents, Arminius' teachings on the doctrine of election are presented in a relatively brief, less scholastic and more pastoral form than in Arminius' writings.

For our purpose, the most important opinion of the Remonstrants with respect to the topic of assurance is the fifth, especially as it is set forth in *The Opinions of the Remonstrants* (1618). Upon the basis of Arminius' doctrines of conditional election (First Point), universal atonement in Christ (Second Point), human sinfulness and the sufficiency of God's grace to enable (but not effect) faith (Third and Fourth Points), the Remonstrants offer a distinct opinion regarding the topic of the assurance of election and salvation.³¹

In the Fifth Opinion, they affirm that a true assurance of salvation is possible for believers, but such assurance must be distinguished from the careless security that the Reformed view encourages. While those who believe the gospel promise and endeavor to live accordingly may have an assurance of their salvation so long as they believe, they may not have a certain assurance that God will preserve them to the end, or that such perseverance is an invariable "effect" of God's absolute decree to save them. Because true believers can and do fail to persevere in faith and godliness, thereby losing the salvation that was once theirs, they do not have assurance that in the future God will effectively preserve them "in faith and those works of piety and love which are fitting."³² Since their election and salvation depends upon a persevering faith, the assurance of salvation that believers have "for the present time" does not include an assurance with respect to the future. To affirm a certain assurance of future preservation is neither necessary nor beneficial, since such assurance encourages carelessness and inattention to the "diligent watchfulness" to which the Scriptures call all believers. Thus, in a remarkably clear manner, the Fifth Opinion of the Remonstrants accurately expresses the concerns of Arminius

30. De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, includes an English translation of these documents in two appendices (C and H), 243-45, 261-68.

31. Interestingly, the *Remonstrance of 1610* offers an indefinite opinion on this topic, noting that it must "first be more carefully determined from the Holy Scriptures before we shall be able to teach this [the possibility of a losing salvation through negligence] with the full persuasion of our heart" (De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 245).

32. De Jong, *ibid.*, 268.

regarding the predominant Reformed view of assurance, especially his fear that it encourages a false and careless security. Furthermore, the Remonstrants' Fifth Opinion draws out more thoroughly the implications of Arminius' teaching for an assurance of salvation with respect to the future. Since true believers are not promised a persevering faith in consequence of God's gracious election, they are not permitted an assurance that they will persist in faith and thereby be saved.

1.2. Karl Barth's Critical Assessment of the Canons of Dort On Election and the Assurance of Salvation

The question of the relation between election and the assurance of salvation was an important issue in the debates between Arminian and Reformed theologians prior to and after the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619. But it has also continued to preoccupy theologians in more recent debates regarding the doctrine of election. In the twentieth-century, at least two significant chapters were added to the history of reflection on this question. The first of these chapters was written by Karl Barth, whose revision of the traditional Reformed view was motivated by his dissatisfaction with the older view as represented by Calvin and codified in the Canons of Dort. According to Barth, one of the primary weaknesses in the older view of election lies in its failure to provide a satisfactory account of the relation between God's gracious election in Christ and the certainty of salvation.

1.2.1. Assurance: The Impulse for Barth's Revision of the Doctrine of Election

Karl Barth's revision of the doctrine of election represents one of the most distinctive features of his theology.³³ In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth locates the doctrine of election squarely within the context of the doctrine of God.³⁴ Consistent with the starting point of his dogmatics in the doctrine of God's self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ, Barth insists that election lies at the heart of what God has revealed regarding himself. God can only be known through God, and that knowledge is given to us exclusively in his acts in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God become incarnate. The doctrine of election reveals who God is in his eternal self-determination to be a God for us in Jesus Christ. For this reason, early in his treatment of election, Barth insists, "The election of grace [is] ... the sum of the

33. For general summaries of Barth's doctrine of election, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1956), 262-96; Michael T. Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Fred Klooster, *The Significance of Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961), esp. 64-73; Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; and David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (London: T & T Clark, 2009).

34. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II/2: *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957).

Gospel ... the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce*.”³⁵ The good news that is revealed to us in the gospel is the good news that God has determined to be known by the name of Jesus Christ, that is, as the God who wills graciously to be for us in him.

But it is not only that Barth places the doctrine of election at the core of his doctrine of God. He also intends to offer a revised doctrine of election that removes the difficulties allegedly associated with the traditional doctrine of Calvin and the Reformed tradition. In the preface to volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth notes that he found it necessary to depart from Calvin’s theology at this juncture:

The work has this peculiarity, that in it I have had to leave the framework of theological tradition to a far greater extent than in the first part on the doctrine of God. I would have preferred to follow Calvin’s doctrine of predestination much more closely, instead of departing from it so radically. ... But I could not and cannot do so. As I let the Bible itself speak to me on these matters, as I meditated upon what I seemed to hear, I was driven irresistibly to reconstruction.³⁶

In Barth’s estimation, Calvin’s doctrine of election burdens the Scripture’s teaching with the notion of a secret, inscrutable, and non-gracious will of God. The note of God’s triumphant grace in Jesus Christ is muted in Calvin’s teaching, and placed alongside a contrary note, one which speaks of an unknown God, who opposes some toward whom he chooses not to be gracious.

For Barth, the starting point for a correct doctrine of election must be what we know of God as he reveals himself in Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh. Any knowledge or speech about God that is not based upon God’s free decision to enter into covenant with man in the person of Jesus Christ is an abstraction. God is who he is in Jesus Christ, and there is no other God than the God who determines to be for us in him. As Barth puts it,

If we would know what election is, what it is to be elected by God, then we must look away from all others, and excluding all side-glances or secondary thoughts we must look only upon the name of Jesus Christ and upon the actual existence and history of the people whose beginning and end are enclosed in the mystery of His name.³⁷

For Barth, all knowledge of the true and living God must be derived from the way God acts in his free decision to elect humanity for communion with himself in Christ. In this act, and in the history of Jesus Christ that flows from it, we find God himself to be one who loves in freedom and who is free in his loving.

Contrary to the idea of an “absolute decree” (*decretum absolutum*) in which God secretly and sovereignly elects to save some and not others, Barth maintains that

35. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 13-14.

36. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, x.

37. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 58-9.

God's election is an eternal act in Jesus Christ, who is both electing God and elected man. The fatal error of the older doctrine of election is that it posits an unknown God who elects to save some and not others. Jesus Christ is not the beginning and the end of all of God's gracious purposes, but merely a means to an end. But if Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God, as we read in the prologue of the Gospel of John ("in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God"), then we may not speak or know anything *extra* about God in the doctrine of election than what we are given to know in Jesus Christ alone.³⁸ In Barth's interpretation of John 1:1, the Word who was "with God in the beginning" refers to God's eternal self-determination to be for us in Jesus Christ: "The electing [of Jesus Christ, both as electing God and the elected man] consists in this Word and decree in the beginning."³⁹ Traditionally, Christian theologians have read John 1:1 as though it referred to the self-existence of the eternal Son of God, who is distinguished from the Father and the One through whom all things were made. In the language of theology, the eternal Word is the *Logos asarkos* (the Word apart from his incarnation), the eternal Word who was and always is, prior to and independent of his incarnation as the *logos ensarkos* (the Word become flesh, the incarnate Word). While Barth recognizes that his appeal to this passage is unusual, he argues that it provides the proper biblical context within which to present a revised doctrine of election. Contrary to the traditional view, which assumes the pre-existence of the eternal Word "before" his self-determination to be electing God, Barth identifies the eternal Word with God's determination to be the electing God in Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

Furthermore, in Barth's view Jesus Christ is not only the *subject* of election—the God who freely and lovingly elects to be for us. For Barth, Jesus Christ is at the same time the *object* of God's election. "[B]efore all created reality, before all being and becoming in time, before time itself, in the pre-temporal eternity of God, the eternal divine decision as such has as its object and content the existence of this one created being, the man Jesus of Nazareth, and the work of this man in His life and death, His humiliation and exaltation, His obedience and merit."⁴¹ The solution to the problem posed by the traditional doctrine of election, which distinguishes between God's election of some to salvation and his reprobation of others to condemnation, lies in the proper recognition that God's election is the election of the one man, Jesus Christ, and in him the election of all. Once this is established, the truth embedded in the traditional "supralapsarian" view of the order of God's decrees becomes evident. God's election of Jesus Christ is indeed the first, primal act of God from which all that God does in time follows. The true "object of

38. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 94-5: "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. For it is God's free grace that in Him He elects to be man and to have dealings with man and to join Himself to man. He, Jesus Christ, is the free grace of God as not content simply to remain identical with the inward and eternal being of God, but operating *ad extra* in the ways and works of God."

39. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 100.

40. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 94-9.

41. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 116.

election” (*obiectum praedestinationis*) must not be viewed either as a particular number of already created and already fallen human beings (the infralapsarian view) or as a particular number of not yet created and not yet fallen human beings (the supralapsarian view). Because the true object of election is the man Jesus Christ (and all human beings in him), we may affirm the truth of supralapsarianism, namely, that the first act of God’s self-determination is his gracious election or free decision to love all people in the one man whom he has elected, Jesus Christ.⁴²

Upon the basis of his view of Jesus Christ as electing God and elected man, Barth offers a remarkably novel interpretation of the legitimate sense in which we may speak of God’s purpose of election and reprobation. In the older “double predestination” view of Augustine and Calvin, God’s purpose of election is twofold: first, to show mercy to those individuals whom he wills to save (election); and second, to show justice to those individuals whom he wills to pass by (preterition) and condemn for their sins. Barth believes that this understanding of double predestination removes any sure footing for an assurance of God’s grace and favor toward us in Jesus Christ. Who is able to fathom the depths of God’s “secret will” so as to determine whether or not God’s Word in Christ is a word in which God’s grace ultimately triumphs for you as an individual? However, if the object of election is the man Jesus Christ, who is both the God who elects and the man whom he elects, then we have assurance that God’s grace triumphs in God’s act of election. According to Barth, we must recognize that election means gracious election for the man Jesus Christ and reprobation for God. Election has a double consequence, grace and judgment, Yes and No, and this double consequence is assumed by God himself in Jesus Christ. At one and the same time, Jesus Christ is the elected man and the reprobated God. By his free decision of election, God has chosen to bear the rejection, punishment, and condemnation that all human beings deserve. And at the same time, God has chosen to say “Yes” to Jesus Christ as the man of his choosing, and in him to say “Yes” to all men.

If the teachers of predestination were right when they spoke always of a duality, of election and reprobation, of predestination to salvation or perdition, to life or death, then we may say already that in election of Jesus Christ which is the eternal will of God, God has ascribed to man the former, election, salvation and life; and to Himself He has ascribed the latter, reprobation, perdition and death.⁴³

When we understand election as the act whereby God elects himself to be the man, Jesus Christ, it is no longer possible to view election as equally directed toward the salvation of some human beings and the damnation of others. Such a view fails to recognize that God suffers the damnation that all human beings deserve in order that they might be the recipients of his love and favor.⁴⁴ We have a sure basis for

42. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 135.

43. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 163.

44. Remarkably, though Barth’s doctrine of election appears to warrant the conclusion that all human beings will be saved (universalism), he expressly rejects this conclusion (Barth,

confidence regarding God's gracious will and purpose to save all human beings in the election of Jesus Christ.

1.2.2. Barth's Criticism of the Canons' Doctrine of the Assurance of Salvation

In the volume of the *Church Dogmatics* in which he presents his revision of the doctrine of election, Barth comments on the Canons of Dort in two passages. On both of these occasions, Barth argues that the Canons' formulation of the doctrine of election, though preferable to the view of the Arminian party, betrays the same fundamental problem regarding assurance that was present in the formulations of Calvin and other Reformed theologians in the early orthodox period. Because the Canons do not present Christ as the proper foundation of election, both as the electing God and the elected (and reprobated) man, the election of God must remain inscrutable and hidden from our knowledge in a way that radically undermines our assurance of salvation.

In the first of these passages, Barth begins by observing that the Canons fail to speak of Christ as both the "foundation" and the "executor" of God's decree of election.⁴⁵ By failing to speak of Christ as the foundation of God's decree, the Canons do not escape the problem of an "absolute decree" (*decretum absolutum*) in which God freely, sovereignly, and secretly determines to save some persons in and through the work of Christ and to leave others in their sin and condemnation. Barth notes that the "Opinions of the Remonstrants" did include a "striking sentence," which identified Christ, the Mediator, as "not only the executor of election, but the foundation of the very decree of election" (*Christus mediator non est solum executor electionis, sed ipsius decreti electionis fundamentum*).⁴⁶ While the sentiment expressed in this sentence points in a proper direction, it was undermined by the Remonstrants' semi-Pelagian view of "the dignity of man standing over against Jesus Christ in an autonomous freedom of decision." In the Arminian view, even though Christ is said to be the foundation of election, the efficacy of his work ultimately depends upon the free decision of some to believe. As a result, the Arminian view fails to do justice to Christ as the true foundation of election and the assurance of salvation.

Though Barth is more favorably disposed to the position of the Canons, which at least preserves the truth that God's electing grace is the sole basis for the salvation of

Church Dogmatics, II/2, 417-18). Cf. Klooster, *The Significance of Barth's Theology*, 70, who argues that Barth's rejection of universalism seriously undermines his argument against an unknown (and hence unreliable) God: "Barth's leaving open the question of a possible universalism, and his refusal to affirm or deny this theory, seems to involve an unknown God. The frontier from election to rejection and vice versa can be repeatedly crossed and criss-crossed. In view of the freedom of God, Barth insists that we must leave open the possibility as to what will eventually happen. But this view of the freedom of God involves an Unknown God and is in conflict with Scripture."

45. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 67.

46. Barth, *Church Dogmatic*, II/2, 68.

any human being, he judges them to fail at a critical point. Rather than viewing Christ himself as “the God who freely elects and then acts towards the creature, the One behind and above whom there is no other God and no other election,” the Canons allow a disjunction between the foundation of election in God’s “absolute decree” and the execution of that decree through the work of Christ as Mediator.⁴⁷ By doing so, the Canons make a “fatal” error that can only deprive believers of any sure knowledge of their election by and in Christ.

On the one hand, then, the decree of salvation was emptied of meaning, for quite unintentionally it was rendered inevitable that the true divine decision should be sought elsewhere than in the Saviour, Jesus Christ. And, on the other hand, the decree of election was also emptied of meaning, for it was removed to the divine sphere above and behind Christ where it could in fact be known as Christian truth. And that meant that there could be no sure knowledge of it at all, and that it was set in the light of a purely speculative axiom.⁴⁸

In the final analysis, the Canons leave us with an absolute decree of God to elect and to reprobate that is prior to, and therefore hidden behind and underneath, the saving work of Christ. Since God’s secret will and decree are distinct from what is revealed through the gracious work of Christ as Mediator, we are left with a *Deus absconditus*, an “unknown God” who is distinct from the *Deus revelatus*, the “God revealed” in Jesus Christ.

In the second place where Barth comments on the teaching of the Canons, his concern regarding their treatment of the question of assurance is even more explicit. In a lengthy excursus on the question of assurance in the period of Reformed orthodoxy, Barth argues that the Canons’ view of assurance departs from that of Calvin and the early period of the Reformation.⁴⁹ Whereas Calvin primarily emphasized the objective grounds for assurance in the person and work of Christ, who is the “mirror of election” (*speculum electionis*), later Reformed orthodoxy moved in a more subjective direction. Rather than basing the assurance of salvation in the witness of the gospel to Jesus Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit, Reformed theologians increasingly turned to the way believers find assurance through the testimony of the fruits of a lively faith. Even though Calvin acknowledged the subordinate and secondary role of “good works” in the confirmation of salvation, he never allowed them to function as the primary or “crown witness” to the genuineness of faith and the assurance of salvation. However, beginning with Beza and in the writings of later Reformed theologians, what was subordinate and secondary in Calvin’s position became increasingly foundational

47. Barth, *Church Dogmatic*, II/2, 68-69.

48. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 69.

49. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 333-40.

and primary. The practical syllogism becomes a principal factor in the cultivation of assurance.⁵⁰

According to Barth, though the Canons seem to follow Calvin's approach in The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine, Article 10, they betray a different emphasis elsewhere, particularly in the Rejection of Errors, V/5, and in the First Main Head of Doctrine, Article 12. Rather than viewing the good works that are produced by true faith as a further confirmation of an assurance that it fundamentally based upon the promises of the gospel in Jesus Christ and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, the Canons give priority to the role of good works in obtaining assurance. In the Rejection of Errors, V/5, the authors of the Canons place "the marks peculiar to God's children" before "God's completely reliable promises," when they consider the basis for a believer's "assurance of future perseverance in this life."⁵¹ For Barth, this ordering reflects the trend among Reformed theologians, commencing with Theodore Beza, to grant priority to "empirical self-examination and self-evaluation" in the cultivation of assurance.

In Barth's evaluation of the Canons' teaching on the assurance of election, Article I/12 is especially problematic. This Article speaks of an assurance of election that derives from the believer's "noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God's Word—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on." Commenting on this particular Article, Barth uses strong language. What makes this Article "so hard to stomach" is the way it displaces the true and fundamental foundation for assurance—the work of Christ and the promises of the gospel—and gives priority to subjective grounds that can never warrant a certain assurance of salvation. Such an approach does not radically diverge from the historic position of Roman Catholicism, which teaches that believers may only have a probable assurance based upon an evaluation of their life and conduct: "If we believe that the assurance of election referred to will be finally and conclusively established in this way [by looking at its "unmistakable fruits"]—in palpable divergence from Calvin—where then do we stand *vis-à-vis Tridentine Catholicism*?"⁵²

50. Though Barth opposes Calvin's limited, non-technical appeal to what later Reformed theologians called the "practical syllogism," he correctly recognizes its presence in Calvin's theology. For studies that convincingly confirm the presence of the practical syllogism in Calvin's treatment of assurance, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1999), 65-72; Robert W. A. Letham, *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort* (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979), 134-41; Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005 [1993]), 188-203; Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 248-61; Francois Wendell, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 275-77; and Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 247-58.

51. Barth, *Church Dogmatic*, II/2, 336.

52. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 336.

In Barth's estimation, the Canons' attempt to found the assurance of salvation upon the subjective experience of believers stems from a fundamental weakness already present in Calvin's doctrine of God's secret and inscrutable will to save some and not others. As he puts it, "If Christ is only the means of grace of the God who secretly elects or rejects, then how can He be the crown witness for his election."⁵³ Since the Canons' doctrine of election, following Calvin, does not view Christ as the foundation of God's election, and the election of all human beings in him, Christ and the promises of God's grace in him cannot be the exclusive ground or basis for assurance. Believers are directed to find in themselves, in their subjective faith together with its fruits, what cannot be found in Christ alone, namely, a sure footing for a certain assurance of his electing favor. For this reason, Barth judges that the older Reformed doctrine of election needs a thorough-going revision like the one he proposes, which makes Christ both the foundation and Mediator of election.⁵⁴

1.3. The Kendall Thesis: "Calvin Against the Calvinists"

In recent discussions of the doctrine of election and its implications for the question of the assurance of salvation, considerable attention has focused upon the thesis of R. T. Kendall.⁵⁵ According to Kendall, whose thesis is often identified by the expression, "Calvin against the Calvinists," the approach to the assurance of salvation in later Calvinism diverges significantly from Calvin's view.⁵⁶ Whereas Calvin affirmed that assurance is an essential element of true faith, which rests in the gospel promise of salvation upon the basis of the work of Christ alone, later Calvinism increasingly turned to the subjective experience of believers as the basis for assurance. In later Calvinism, beginning with the theology of Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, the doctrine of election was no longer formulated in a Christocentric

53. Barth, *Church Dogmatic*, II/2, 338.

54. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 340.

55. *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1997 [1979]).

56. For similar interpretations of the Reformed tradition that seek to contrast Calvin with later Calvinism, see Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield, trans. G. S. R. Cox and P. G. Rix, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 19–37; and Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). For a compelling refutation of this approach, see Richard A. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," Part 1, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30/2 (1995): 345–75, and Part 2, *Calvin Theological Journal* 31/1 (1996): 125–60; Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–8; Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1988), esp. 175–82; Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225–44.

way but in terms of God's inscrutable, double decree of election and reprobation. Whereas Calvin based assurance upon the objective foundation of Christ and his saving work, later Calvinism, beginning with Beza (who in turn influenced later Puritans such as William Perkins and William Ames) emphasized the practical syllogism as the primary basis for the believer's assurance of God's favor.⁵⁷ While Kendall's thesis reflects the influence of Barth's approach to the doctrine of election, he differs from Barth by denying the claim that Calvin himself made limited use of the practical syllogism in his understanding of the grounds for the assurance of salvation.⁵⁸

While Kendall's thesis is complex and controversial, it can be briefly summarized in terms of three key components.

The first component of Kendall's thesis is his interpretation of Calvin's understanding of Christ's work of atonement. Whereas Beza and later Calvinism taught that Christ's atonement was accomplished particularly or definitely for the elect, Calvin taught a doctrine of universal atonement. According to Kendall, Calvin's view distinguished between Christ's death for all persons and his intercession only for the elect.

Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin (1509-64) is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men... Calvin stresses the death of Christ in connection with assurance of salvation, but places the origin of saving faith in the intercessory work of Christ at the Father's right hand. While Christ *died* for all, "He does not pray for all", Calvin claims. Had not Christ died for *all*, we could have no assurance that *our* sins have been expiated in God's sight.⁵⁹

Because Calvin taught that Christ died indiscriminately for all fallen sinners, he was able to insist that Christ's atonement provides a clear and undeniable pledge of God's love for all. Rather than having to direct our attention to God's secret decree of election, Calvin was able to direct believers to the death of Christ as a certain guarantee of God's love toward all. As Kendall puts it, "Had Christ died only for those whom God had chosen by His secret decree, then, it would obviously cease to

57. For a critical assessment of these claims, see Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 258-76.

58. For studies that share Kendall's claims regarding the difference between Calvin and later Calvinism on the practical syllogism, see Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 158-79; John Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1975), 107-11; M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1985), 31; and Kwang-Woong Yu, "Syllogismus Practicus bei Calvin," Fifth International Congress on Calvin Research (Calvin Theological Seminary, 1990). See fn 50 *supra* for studies that argue the presence of a modest form of the practical syllogism in Calvin's theology.

59. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 13-14. Helm exposes the weakness of Kendall's claim at this point (*Calvin and the Calvinists*, 11): "If Christ died for all, but only intercedes for some, how can his death be the ground of assurance of final salvation?" For a similar sentiment, see Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 35.

be a pledge to all.”⁶⁰ For Calvin, accordingly, the foundation or point of departure for the assurance believers may have of God’s love and grace lies in the universal atonement of Christ. However, for later Calvinists, beginning with Beza, Christ’s atonement was only accomplished for the elect and therefore could no longer be a sufficient basis for the believer’s assurance of salvation.

The second component of Kendall’s thesis focuses upon Calvin’s understanding of true faith, which is the means whereby we are united to Christ and become benefactors of his saving work. Kendall maintains that Calvin views faith strictly as God’s gracious gift whereby we are given a sure and certain knowledge of God’s promises to us in Christ. Faith is not an act of the will, but a passive acknowledgment of what is freely given to us in Christ. Based upon his interpretation of Calvin’s descriptions of true faith, Kendall observes:

What stands out in these descriptions is the given, intellectual, passive, and assuring nature of faith. What is absent is a need for gathering faith, voluntarism, faith as man’s act, and faith that must await experimental knowledge to verify its presence.⁶¹

Because Calvin defines faith as a passive acceptance of what God has provided for all in Christ’s work of atonement, Kendall argues that faith always includes an immediate assurance of salvation. Whereas later Calvinism views faith as an act of the will that may be examined as to its genuineness, Calvin views faith as simply an acknowledgement that God’s promise in Christ is true. Nothing more is required. Since Calvin conceives of faith “as merely witnessing what God has already done in Christ,” he includes the assurance of salvation as an essential and invariable element of true faith.

The third component of Kendall’s thesis argues that later Calvinism, by virtue of its doctrines of limited atonement and of faith as an act of the will, necessarily undermined the proper basis for the assurance of salvation. When later Calvinism emphasized limited or definite atonement, it removed the basis for the believer’s assurance of God’s grace in Christ’s atoning death for all. Furthermore, by emphasizing the activity rather than the passivity of faith as God’s gift, later Calvinism also separated faith and the assurance of salvation. In later Calvinism, faith and assurance are no longer integrally joined together. Rather, later Calvinism increasingly begins to focus upon “preparations” for the act of faith, and the cultivation of assurance through self-examination and reflection. The experience of faith becomes the focus rather than the passive acknowledgment of the gospel’s promise in Christ. Contrary to Calvin’s rejection of the practical syllogism, later Calvinist theologians (Beza, Perkins, Ames) and confessions (Westminster

60. *Ibid.*, 14.

61. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 19. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, 7: “The reasoning [of Kendall] here seems to be as follows: if one takes the view that faith is a passive persuasion of the mind, rather than an act of the will, then it is possible to hold that assured faith is something granted by God. If, on the other hand, faith is an act of the will, there will always be the possibility of doubting that the act has been properly performed.”

Standards), appeal to the fruits of faith as the primary basis for the cultivation of assurance. Assurance of salvation becomes an elusive goal, and not the starting point of faith. The subjective fruits of faith become the primary basis for the cultivation of assurance. The biblical exhortation to make one's calling and election sure is no longer understood, as it was for Calvin, as a call to acknowledge Christ as a sure pledge of God's love. For later Calvinism, this exhortation is understood as a call to make their calling and election "sure to themselves."⁶²

Admittedly, each of these points could easily be expanded. However, our summary is sufficient to provide a context for the remainder of my study, which will treat directly the teaching of the Canons of Dort on the topic of assurance. Though Kendall appeals to the writings of later Calvinist theologians, as well as the Westminster Standards, to support his thesis, it is evident that this thesis also has implications for an evaluation of the teaching of the Canons.⁶³ Since the Canons were written during the period of early Reformed orthodoxy after Calvin, shortly before the convening of the Westminster Assembly, their teaching on assurance provide a proper test case for examining the cogency of Kendall's thesis. This is especially true in view of the similarities between the Canons' treatment of the topic of assurance and that found in the Westminster Standards. Furthermore, since the Canons provide a clear statement of the doctrine of limited or definite atonement, they provide ample opportunity to examine Kendall's thesis that this doctrine is inimical to the assurance that true faith ought to produce. To that task we will turn in the second part of this study.

62. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 25.

63. Kendall does expressly refer to the Canons of Dort on several occasions in his thesis (*Calvin and English Calvinism*, 1fn; 2; 30fn; 112fn; 150; 152fn; 153).