

THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION IN  
*THE CANONS OF DORT:*  
 A COMMEMORATIVE ESSAY (PART TWO)

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IN THE FIRST PART of this study, I provided a broad overview of the historic debates regarding the assurance of election and salvation in Reformed theology.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the preparation of the Canons, the Remonstrants or followers of Arminius argued that the Reformed doctrine of election undermined the believer's ability to obtain assurance. In their view, the consensus Reformed view of election either encouraged believers to cultivate a careless certainty regarding their salvation or to yield to despair or hopelessness. In the estimation of the Remonstrants, the doctrine of unconditional election inevitably leaves believers without a sure basis for assurance and raises insoluble questions regarding God's gracious disposition toward all those whom he calls to faith in Christ through the gospel. In addition to the Arminian charge that unconditional election undermines the believer's assurance of salvation, I also considered two later critics of the Canon's teaching, Karl Barth and R. T. Kendall, each of whom has influenced more recent theological discussion of the topic of the assurance of election and salvation. According to Barth, the historic Reformed view of election needs to be revised significantly in order to provide a more sure basis for assurance. For Barth, because the Canons' doctrine of unconditional election raises the specter of a "secret" and "inscrutable" divine decree that lies behind God's revelation of his grace in Christ, believers are driven to look to their own faith and its "fruits" as the basis for confidence in God's favor. Rather than finding assurance in God's determination to be the God who is "for us" in Christ, believers have to turn to the works that true faith produces as a primary ground for assurance. Likewise, Kendall maintains that later Calvinism, including its confessional codification in the Canons, diverges from Calvin and earlier Calvinism on the subject of assurance. By affirming the teaching of "limited" or definite atonement, the Canons call into question the veracity of the universal call of the gospel and its concomitant promise of God's saving mercy toward all whom he calls to faith.

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1. Cornelis P. Venema, "The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort*: A Commemorative Essay," Part One, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 29 (2018): 23-46.

## 2. Assurance of Election and Salvation in the Canons

My overview of past and more recent debates regarding the assurance of salvation in the Canons of Dort raises a number of questions that will need to be addressed as we consider their teaching. Though I will wait until the final part of this article to address these questions directly, my overview of these debates provides the context for considering the Canons' teaching in what follows. While there is always the danger of reading the Canons through the lens of modern theological discussions, my summary will endeavor to allow the Canons to speak for themselves within the context in which they were written. Since the most significant treatment of the topic of assurance occurs in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine (Perseverance), my summary of the Canons' teaching will devote special attention to the way the previous four points prepare for what is affirmed in the Fifth Point.

### 2.1. Assurance of Salvation in the First Main Point of Doctrine: Unconditional Election

The First Main Point of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort is undoubtedly the most important. In this Point, the Canons set forth the principal difference between the Reformed and Arminian understanding of election. Rather than making God's election dependent upon the foreseen faith of those who respond properly to the gospel call, the Canons maintain that election and salvation are wholly dependent upon God's gracious purpose to save a particular number of persons out of the fallen human race in Adam. God's election is a sovereign act of sheer grace, and does not rest upon any distinguishing works or acts on the part of those whom he freely chooses to save in Christ.

#### Unconditional Election: Articles 1-11

In order to provide the biblical context for an understanding of God's unconditional election of his people in Christ, the opening articles of the First Point begin by summarizing the Bible's teaching regarding human sinfulness and the provision for salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because all human beings have fallen in Adam, they are justly deserving of the curse of God, condemnation and death, for their original and actual sins. No sinful human being has any just claim upon God's favor. Therefore, the Canons begin by declaring that "God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin" (Art. 1). Though no sinner is deserving of God's grace or favor, God has nonetheless shown his love by sending his only-begotten Son into the world, "so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Art. 2). God also sends his messengers into the world with the "joyful message" of salvation through faith in Christ crucified, and calls all those who hear this message to respond in faith and repentance in order to be saved (Art. 3). When sinners are called through the gospel to faith and salvation in Jesus Christ, some respond to the gospel invitation in the way of faith, while others remain unbelieving

and impenitent (Art. 4). Those who believe the gospel promise of salvation through faith in Christ are granted deliverance from God's anger and receive the gift of eternal life. Those who refuse the overtures of the gospel, however, remain under condemnation and death.

Within the framework of these basic Scriptural themes, the Canons articulate the doctrine of unconditional election as the only Scriptural explanation for the reason some respond in faith and are saved, whereas others disbelieve and remain in their sins. According to the Word of God, faith and all that it produces are the free gift of God (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29), not a human work that finds its source within the one who believes (Art. 5). God's gracious election alone is the source of such faith, and the ultimate ground for the salvation of the elect to whom he grants faith, even as he leaves others in their hardness of heart.

The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decision. ... In accordance with this decision he graciously softens the hearts, however hard, of his chosen ones and inclines them to believe, but by his just judgment he leaves in their wickedness and hardness of heart those who have not been chosen. And in this especially is disclosed to us his act—unfathomable, and as merciful as it is just—of distinguishing between people equally lost. (Art. 6)

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he 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. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. He did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation. (Art. 7)

These two statements express the burden of the First Main Point of Doctrine: the election and salvation of fallen sinners are ultimately rooted in God's gracious and sovereign decision in Christ to grant salvation, and all that belongs to such salvation, to those whom he is pleased to save, leaving others in their hardness of heart and willful rebellion. In subsequent articles, the Canons reject the Arminian teaching that election depends upon God's foreknowledge of those who choose to respond believingly to the gospel. Election and salvation find their source in God's loving, unchangeable good-pleasure to grant, upon the basis of Christ's saving work of atonement, faith and all the blessings of salvation to those whom he freely chooses to save.

Because our focus is upon the Canons' teaching regarding the assurance of salvation, the question that requires our special attention is: What do the authors of the Canons say about the assurance of election and salvation in this First Point? In three prominent places, this question is directly addressed.

## The “Unmistakeable Marks of Election”: Articles 12-13

Already in Article 6, which offers the first formulation of the doctrine of unconditional election, the Canons speak of the way this teaching offers “holy and godly souls with comfort beyond words.” However, Articles 12 and 13 present the most direct testimony regarding the assurance of election and salvation in the First Main Point. The first of these articles describes the way in which such assurance may be obtained, and the second distinguishes true assurance from what the Canons call a “carnal self-assurance.”

Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God’s Word—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. (Art. 12)

In their awareness and assurance of this election God’s children daily find greater cause to humble themselves before God, to adore the fathomless depth of his mercies, to cleanse themselves, and to give fervent love in return to him who first so greatly loved them. This is far from saying that this teaching concerning election, and reflection upon it, make God’s children lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured. By God’s just judgment this does usually happen to those who casually take for granted the grace of election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen. (Art. 13)

Reflection on these articles and their approach to the question of assurance warrants several preliminary observations.

First, though these articles affirm the propriety of obtaining assurance, they approach the topic pastorally, recognizing that believers do not always enjoy the same measure of assurance. While assurance is granted to believers “in due time ... by various stages and in differing measure,” the authors of the Canons acknowledge that such assurance is not immediately and invariably granted to all without exception.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the insistence that full and undoubted assurance is always the explicit fruit of true faith may contribute to a needless anxiety regarding God’s gracious favor toward us in Christ. For this reason, in a subsequent article, the Canons encourage

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2. The language used by the Canons in I/13 is remarkably similar to that found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 18, especially 18.3. Though the doctrine of assurance in the Westminster Confession of Faith is often alleged to be contrary to that found in the Three Forms of Unity, this allegation is unfounded. These confessions concur in their pastoral recognition that some believers struggle with doubt in the course of their lives, even though assurance ought ordinarily and properly to belong to faith when it embraces the gospel promise in Christ.

those with doubts regarding their election to remember that “our merciful God has promised that he will not snuff out a smoldering wick and that he will not break a bruised reed” (Art. 16). Though the assurance of salvation ought properly to accompany true faith, the authors of the Canons are aware of the subtle way in which a non-pastoral treatment of this point may unwittingly contribute to the loss of assurance on the part of those who struggle with doubts in respect to their salvation. The frank acknowledgement that some true believers may struggle to obtain full assurance reflects the pastoral tenor of the Canons’ statement of the Reformed view of election.

Second, the emphasis in Article 12 upon the “unmistakeable fruits of election” seems to support the thesis of Barth and Kendall that later Calvinism, including the Canons, diverged from Calvin’s emphasis upon the assurance that belongs to true faith. By this language, the Article seems to privilege what we earlier termed the *a posteriori* grounds for assurance. Rather than emphasizing the objective basis for the assurance of salvation in the gospel Word and promise, the Canons at this point appear to accent the subjective experience of faith and the so-called *sylogismus practicus*. Though we will return to this question in the concluding section of this article, it would be premature at this juncture to draw this conclusion for at least two reasons. In the first place, the emphasis upon the “unmistakeable fruits of election” corresponds to the Canons’ teaching that those whom God graciously elects in Christ are granted faith as a free gift. Because faith is God’s gracious gift and not a human work, the Canons’ emphasis upon the “unmistakeable marks of election” assumes that faith and its fruits find their objective ground in God’s purpose of election and the effectual call of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the Canons at this point are arguing backward from effect to cause, from the “fruits” of election to their source in God’s gracious purpose and call. Because faith and its fruits are grounded in God’s gracious purpose, their presence provides an appropriate confirmation of election and salvation. In the second place, the statement regarding assurance in Article 12 does not stand alone, but needs to be interpreted in the light of other statements, some of which are in the immediate context of this Article, others of which come at later points in the Canons.

Third, the language used in Article 13 suggests that the treatment of assurance at this point in the Canons is especially aimed at refuting the Remonstrants’ complaints against the Reformed position. According to Article 13, the believer’s awareness and assurance of election are the occasion for a humble recognition of their complete dependence upon God’s grace and “fathomless mercy.” Such humility is opposed to all forms of proud presumption regarding election and salvation. Moreover, far from encouraging laxity or carelessness, as was alleged by Arminius and the Remonstrants, the awareness of God’s unmerited mercy in Christ toward those who are unworthy, causes believers to respond to God in “fervent love” and in heartfelt resolution to obey his commandments. Arminius’ contention that the Reformed view produces a “careless security” is directly refuted at the end of this Article. The proper teaching of election does not encourage “laxity” in obedience to God’s commandments. Such laxity stems rather from a failure to distinguish believers who have a true assurance of

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3. I will return to this point in the concluding part of this article.

election from “those who causally take for granted the grace of election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen.” The language of this Article helps to contextualize the emphasis in Article 12. The emphasis upon the “unmistakeable fruits of election” in this Article aims to guard against the Remonstrant claim that the Reformed view lends comfort to those who presume their election, though they do not walk accordingly.

And fourth, the pastoral and polemical context for the Canons’ statements on assurance in the First Main Point becomes especially apparent in a subsequent Article (16), which treats the way some might be unsettled in their assurance of election by the Canons’ teaching on reprobation. This Article acknowledges again that some believers may “not yet actively experience within themselves a living faith in Christ or an assured confidence of heart.” Such believers are encouraged to rest in God’s promise to work faith in them, and to use with diligence the “means by which God has promised to work these things in us.” Rather than engaging in a curious and fruitless effort to search into the “hidden and deep things of God” (cf. Art. 12), so long as such believers continue in the diligent use of the means God has given, they will grow in the assurance of salvation. However, in the case of those who “have abandoned themselves wholly to the cares of the world and the pleasures of the flesh,” they “have every reason to stand in fear of this teaching, as long as they do not seriously turn to God.” The true assurance of election and salvation, therefore, has nothing in common with the kind of careless security alleged against it by the Remonstrants.

#### Article 17: Assurance of the Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy

Perhaps one of the most important affirmations regarding the assurance of election and salvation in the Canons is found in Article 17 of the First Main Point. This Article was not part of an earlier draft of the Canons, but was added at the insistence of some of the delegations to the Synod of Dort.<sup>4</sup> These delegations asked for the addition of Article 17 in order to answer a common objection to the Reformed doctrine of election among the Remonstrants. According to the Remonstrants, the Reformed teaching on election offered no comfort or assurance to godly parents whose infant children were called out of this life. Among the “false accusations” identified in the conclusion to the Canons, this Remonstrant complaint is explicitly acknowledged. The Reformed doctrine is said to imply “that many infant children of believers are snatched in their

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4. For more extensive treatments of the background and significance of Article I/17, see W. Robert Godfrey, “A Promise for Parents: Dordt’s Perspective on Covenant and Election,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 373-86; Erik A. De Boer, “‘O, ye Women, Think of Thy Innocent Children, When They Die Young!’ The Canons of Dordt (First Head, Article Seventeen) between Polemic and Pastoral Theology,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, ed. Goudrian and Van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 261-90; and Cornelis P. Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Reprobation, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 214-55.

innocence from their mothers' breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them."<sup>5</sup>

The answer to this Remonstrant accusation in Article 17 is of special importance for determining the Canons' approach to the topic of the assurance. In response to the Remonstrants, the authors of the Canons provide a robust statement of the undoubted assurance believing parents may have regarding the election and salvation of their children whom God chooses to call to himself in infancy.

Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy. (Art. 17)

Though this Article is formulated as a *litotes*, a figure of speech that expresses a positive truth in a negative form, it encourages godly parents to have a firm assurance of the election and salvation of such children. Rather than speculatively inquiring into the secret will of God regarding such children, godly parents may rest their confidence in what God has revealed in his Word concerning the covenant of grace and the promise that these children belong to him.<sup>6</sup> Whatever judgment is rendered respecting these children, it must be made upon the basis of God's revelation. No room is left to speculate about God's gracious will respecting them, inasmuch as God has revealed how he regards them and graciously wills to receive them into his fellowship through Christ.<sup>7</sup> These children must be regarded in terms of what we know about their special status as children of the promise.

Remarkably, the Canons' affirmation of the assurance of election and salvation in Article 17 is based solely upon the objective grounds of God's Word and the covenant relationship he grants such children. Unlike Article 12, which appeals to the "unmistakeable fruits of election" as a basis for assurance, the focus of this Article is wholly upon the *a priori* grounds for assurance. These grounds provide a sufficient basis for the firm assurance parents may have regarding their children when they die in infancy. They also give pause to any premature conclusions regarding how the Canons treat the proper grounds of the assurance of salvation. For example, the claim Barth makes about the Canons on the basis of Article 12 needs to be evaluated in the light of the testimony of Article 17, as well as further evidence that we still need to consider in what follows.

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5. Conclusion: *Rejection of False Accusations*.

6. The most frequently quoted Scripture texts in support of this affirmation at the Synod were: Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:39; and 1 Corinthians 7:14. These texts are cited in the Dutch edition of the *Acta* of the Synod.

7. Godfrey, "Dordt's Perspective on Covenant and Election," 386: "Their reasoning was that those incorporated as infants into the covenant of grace sustained a saving relationship to God unless they later in life rejected that covenant. Since those dying in infancy could not reject the covenant, they must be elect and saved."

### No Assurance Possible on the Basis of Conditional Election: Rejection of Errors

The third place in the First Main Point of Doctrine that addresses the issue of assurance is in the Rejection of Errors, particularly Errors VI and VII. According to these two Rejections, the Remonstrants' teaching, following Arminius, seriously undermines the sure basis for the believer's assurance of salvation in God's unchangeable, steadfast and unconditional purpose of election. In these Rejections, the Canons emphasize the certain ground for the believer's confidence in God's gracious purpose of election. These Rejections accent the *a priori* and objective foundation of assurance in God's decision to elect his people in Christ unto salvation.

Rejection VI considers the Arminian view that God's election in Christ is a conditional and consequent will, which depends for its effect upon a persevering faith on the part of those who are called through the gospel. According to the Remonstrants' teaching, some of the chosen "can perish and do in fact perish eternally, with no decision of God to prevent it." Since the Remonstrants teach that election depends upon the decision of some to believe, and not all who believe for a time are promised the gift of a persevering faith, they deny to believers any assurance of the "steadfastness of their election." Though believers may enjoy salvation and election for a time, they are not assured of God's unchangeable purpose to ensure that none of those whom he has chosen will be snatched out of Christ's hands. In the Arminian view, God's absolute and antecedent will to save all sinners in Christ can be frustrated. God's desire to save all sinners can always be thwarted through apostasy on the part of those who previously believed and were saved, but do not choose to persevere in faith.

Rejection VII offers a similar criticism of the Remonstrant position. According to this Rejection, the Remonstrant doctrine of conditional election makes any assurance of salvation conditional upon "something changeable and contingent." The Arminian view does not provide any sure footing for an assurance of "one's unchangeable election to glory." The best the Arminian view can offer is a "uncertain assurance," which is "absurd" and incompatible with the teaching of Scripture. On the Arminian view, the sure confidence that is expressed in Scripture, that the names of God's people "have been written in heaven" (Luke 10:20) and no one can bring any charge against them (Rom. 8:33), is undermined. In this way, believers are exposed to the "flaming arrows of the devil's temptations," and are stripped of their confidence in God's unchangeable election of his people to glory.

#### 2.2. Assurance in the Second Main Point of Doctrine: Particular Redemption

Although the Second Main Point of Doctrine in the Canons, which bears the subtitle "Christ's Death and Human Redemption Through It," is often described as "limited atonement," this terminology does not capture its teaching accurately. The Second Main Point of Doctrine is better described as "particular" or "definite" atonement.<sup>8</sup>

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8. I prefer the language "particular redemption" or "definite atonement" to the usual language, "limited atonement." Though the Reformed view may "limit" the extent or design of Christ's

The burden of the Second Point is that Christ's work of atonement was, according to God's intention and design, aimed to provide for the redemption of the elect. Far from limiting Christ's work of atonement, the Canons insist that this doctrine emphasizes the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work. Whereas the Arminian view teaches that Christ's death was merely provisional, depending for its efficacy upon the uncertain decision of some to believe, the Canons teach that Christ's death was a substitutionary work on behalf of the elect that ensures that they will unfailingly receive all of its benefits, including the gift of faith itself whereby believers embrace what is promised them in the gospel. Unlike the Arminian view, which limits the atonement's depth and fruitfulness, the Reformed view magnifies the work of Christ as a true atonement that actually promises salvation upon the basis of his accomplishment alone. Though the Second Point of the Canons does not include as express a testimony regarding assurance as the First, its teaching has profound implications for determining the Canons' view of the primary grounds for such assurance.

The Second Point of Doctrine begins by noting that God's justice requires satisfaction for the sins that we have committed against his "infinite majesty" (Art. 1). Since we are unable to satisfy God's justice as sinners, God in his "boundless mercy" has given his Son "as a guarantee," one "who was made to be sin and a curse for us, in order that his might give satisfaction for us" (Art. 2). As true God and true man, Christ the Mediator has made an atonement that is of "infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world" (Art. 3).<sup>9</sup> The good news of

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atonement, it in no way limits its full efficacy to accomplish all that God intends to do for the salvation of his people. As the Canons argue, the Arminian view actually limits Christ's atonement most dramatically, since it does not accomplish or ensure the salvation of a single fallen sinner. Unhappily, the "five points" of Dort are commonly identified in English-speaking circles by the acronym, "TULIP" (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints). This acronym is of recent vintage, changes the order of the five points, and employs terminology (especially in the case of "total depravity," "limited atonement," and "irresistible grace") that does not satisfactorily express the Reformed view. For critical assessments of the value of this acronym, see Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Word of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 58-62; Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths About Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Wheaton, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 75-96; and Timothy F. George, *Amazing Grace*. George suggests an alternative acronym, "ROSES" (Radical Depravity, Overcoming Grace, Sovereign election, Eternal life, and Singular redemption).

9. The Canons' use of the language "sufficient for all" reflects a common expression, which is found already in Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (*pro omnibus ... sufficientiam; sed pro electis ... ad efficaciam*; "sufficient for all, but efficient for the elect"). Since this language was liable to a diversity of interpretations, its presence in the Canons illustrates the authors desire to leave room for some diversity among those who affirm particular redemption. Remarkably, Calvin himself, in his comments on 1 John 2:2 (*Calvin's Commentaries* [1844-1856; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981], 22:173), rejected this language as liable to misunderstanding. For treatments of the extent or design of the atonement in Calvin and later Calvinism, see W. Robert Godfrey, "Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37/2 (1975): 133-71; Peter L. Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement: About Efficiency, Sufficiency, and Anachronism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70/2 (2008): 317-35; G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the*

Christ's atoning work, together with the promise to all that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life, therefore, "ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people" (Art. 5). Through the call of the gospel, all sinners are graciously promised salvation upon the basis of Christ's atoning work, and are commanded to believe and repent. That many who are called through the gospel do not repent or believe in Christ is not due to any "deficiency" or "insufficiency" in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Those who respond in unbelief are "themselves at fault" (Art. 6). However, that some of those called genuinely believe and are saved is "solely from God's grace—which he owes to no one—given to them in Christ from eternity" (Art. 7).

After these introductory articles, which emphasize the sufficiency of Christ's work of atonement for all sinners whom God graciously calls to faith and repentance through the gospel, the authors of the Canons turn to the subject of the "saving effectiveness" of Christ's death and the "fulfillment of God's plan" for the salvation of those whom he has chosen.

For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his son's costly death should work itself out in his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to glory. ... [And that Christ] should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit's other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death)... (Art. 8)

This plan, arising out of God's eternal love for his chosen ones, from the beginning of the world to the present time has been carried out in the future, the gates of hell seeking vainly to prevail against it. (Art. 9)

Even though these Articles do not explicitly address the topic of assurance, they have undeniable implications for the believer's confidence and assurance. Unlike the Arminian view, which affirms the universal extent of Christ's atonement but denies that it secures the salvation of anyone, the Canons insist that Christ's atonement

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*Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1675)*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997); Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 33–35; Roger Nicole, "Moysse Amyraut (1596–1664) and the Controversy on Universal Grace: First Phase (1634–1637)" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1966). Muller's comments on the implications of Calvin's view of particular election and the priestly intercession of Christ are especially significant for addressing the (somewhat anachronistic) question whether Calvin's view of Christ's atonement was compatible with later Calvinists: "It is superfluous to speak of a hypothetical extent of the efficacy of Christ's work [in Calvin's theology] beyond its actual application. As shown in the doctrine of election, salvation is not bestowed generally but on individuals. The Gospel appeal is universal but Christ's intercession, like the divine election, is personal, individual, particular" (*Christ and the Decree*, 35).

effectively ensures the salvation of all of those for whom he died. Furthermore, the accomplishment of redemption through Christ's work of atonement is applied in time by Christ himself through his Spirit. All that Christ procured for his people is unfaillingly communicated to them by the ministry of the Spirit. Unlike the Arminian view, the work of Christ as surety guarantees the salvation of those for whom he died and to whom he applies its benefits through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Believers may be assured of their salvation, therefore, upon the basis of the unchanging and invincible purpose of the three Persons of the Trinity, each of whom works in concert with the others to plan, accomplish, and communicate the benefits of Christ's saving work to his own.

The best that the Arminian view of Christ's work can promise is that those who choose to believe, and persist in believing, will be saved. But the assurance that they will be saved does not inhere in the work of Christ, which remains of no effect apart from the "free choice" of some to meet the conditions stipulated in the call of the gospel.<sup>10</sup> Christ's work acquires the possibility of salvation, which depends upon the decision of those called by the gospel to meet the conditions required (faith and repentance) of them. Ultimately, the acquisition of the benefits of Christ's death rests upon the free choice of those who apply his grace to themselves. In the Arminian view, salvation does not ultimately depend upon Christ's work of atonement, but upon the obedience of faith on the part of those who choose to believe. The one condition that must be met in order for anyone to benefit from Christ's saving work is the imperfect obedience of faith on the part of some, who make themselves in this way "worthy of the reward of eternal life" (Rejection of Errors IV). The Arminian view, therefore, undermines the believer's assurance of salvation, which hangs upon the thin thread of his or her evangelical obedience. Christ is not the sure foundation of such assurance, but only the ground for the possibility of assurance. Assurance itself must ultimately depend upon something that sinners choose to do.

### 2.3. Assurance in the Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine: Radical Depravity and Effectual Grace

Just as the topic of assurance is implicit in the Second Main Point of Doctrine, it remains largely implicit as well in the Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine. Nonetheless, these Points lay an important foundation for what is explicitly affirmed about assurance in the Fifth Main Point. Because these points are closely related and interdependent, they are considered together in the Canons of Dort. By considering these points together, the authors of the Canons sought to distinguish clearly and sharply their teaching from that of the Remonstrants. They chose to do so, recognizing that a simple comparison of the Canons' teaching with that of Remonstrants on the Third Point alone would not clearly bring out the significant differences between them. Broadly outlined, the Third and Fourth Main Points treat three important topics: 1) the

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10. Rejection of Errors I "... the necessity, usefulness, and worth of what Christ's death obtains [according to the Arminian view] could have stood intact and altogether perfect, complete and whole, even if the redemption that was obtained had never in actual fact been applied to any individual."

radical depravity of fallen sinners; 2) the serious and gracious call or summons of the gospel, which should be extended to all sinners without exception; and 3) the effectual call of the gospel by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. Before commenting on the way these points bear upon the topic of assurance, a summary of each of them is necessary.

In the opening Articles (1-5) of the Third and Fourth Main Point, the Canons offer a comprehensive statement of the radical depravity of all sinners, who are incapable and unwilling to do any saving good in response to the call of the gospel.<sup>11</sup> Though God originally created human beings in his own image in true knowledge, righteousness and holiness, the human race is now fallen in Adam, who freely deprived himself and all his posterity of the good gifts with which he was first endowed (Art. 1). Because of Adam's original sin and disobedience, all of his posterity have inherited a sinfully corrupted nature (Art. 2). No member of the human race is able to be saved from the consequences of sin apart from God's saving grace and the work of Christ. Fallen sinners are without exception "conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit ..." (Art. 3). Left to themselves, fallen sinners are unwilling and unable to return to God, to reform themselves, or even "to dispose themselves to such reform." Though fallen sinners retain some vestiges of the "light of nature"—including "some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral"—this light of nature is unable to effect any saving knowledge of God and conversion to him (Art. 4). Furthermore, though God has revealed his holy law and will to fallen sinners, especially through the Decalogue given through Moses, the law of God does not impart the power to do what it commands, but rather exposes sinners to the magnitude of their sin. Left to themselves in their fallen condition, sinners are radically depraved, incapable and unwilling to perform any work that would commend them to God's favor. They are unable and unwilling to make amends for or satisfy the just condemnation due them for their sins. But for the intervention of God in saving grace and power, all fallen sinners would remain dead in their trespasses and sins.

After a relatively short description of the lost condition of all fallen sinners, the Canons take up the topic of the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the consequent urgency of proclaiming this gospel to all sinners who can only be saved through faith in him. What fallen sinners are unable and unwilling to do by means of the light of nature or the law, God does by his grace and invincible power. God alone is able to save sinners, and he accomplishes the work of salvation "by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word or ministry of reconciliation" (Art. 6). This is true both in the Old and the New Testaments. Because salvation is ordinarily accomplished by God through the Spirit and the gospel Word, God graciously and lovingly willed that the good message of the gospel be proclaimed to and among all the peoples of the earth, first to Israel as a nation and "now without distinction between peoples" (Art. 7). In an important Article, the Canons also affirm that God "seriously" and

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11. I use the language "radical depravity" (cf. George, *Amazing Grace*), since it captures the burden of the Third Point. The more common language, "total depravity," is difficult to distinguish from "absolute depravity," which is decidedly not the teaching of the Canons.

“genuinely” calls all recipients of the gospel to faith and repentance. By means of the gospel Word and call, God “makes known ... what is pleasing to him: that those who are called should come to him” (Art. 8). In this way, God seriously and urgently “promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe.”

Remarkably, the teaching of the Canons at this point presents a none-too-subtle rebuke to the Remonstrants, who in their “Opinions” had maintained that the Reformed view of unconditional election was incompatible with what is often termed the “well-meant” or “sincere call” of the gospel.<sup>12</sup> Using language that was employed in the Remonstrant Opinions, the Canons affirm unqualifiedly that the gospel Word is to be communicated graciously to all of its recipients, expressing a sincere and serious summons to all to respond in faith and repentance in order to be saved.<sup>13</sup> All who hear the gospel Word are sincerely summoned to do what the Word demands, namely, believe and repent. All are likewise sincerely and truthfully promised that, if they should do so, they may be sure of their salvation through faith in Christ. For this reason, all who refuse the gospel’s call in unbelief and impenitence have only themselves to blame for their rejection of the gospel promise. They may not blame the gospel Word, Christ who is offered through the gospel, or God who calls them and even bestows “various gifts upon them.” Their willful and obstinate unbelief and impenitence remain their own responsibility and occasion for their remaining under condemnation.

Within the setting of these emphases upon the radical depravity of fallen sinners and the seriousness of the gospel call, the most important and extensively-treated topic in the Third and Fourth Points is what might termed the “effectual” conversion of the elect by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who uses the means of the Word to grant faith and repentance to them. In an important summary of this topic, the Canons insist that those who are brought to conversion by the ministry of the gospel are not ultimately distinguished from others by their “free choice” to believe. God does not merely furnish all with an “equal or sufficient grace for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains),” and then wait upon some to do what is required of them by their own power (Art. 10). Even though the Remonstrant position, unlike Pelagius, acknowledges the prevenience and necessity of God’s grace in order for some to believe and repent, it fails to acknowledge the effectual working of the Spirit in granting faith and repentance to those whom God elects to save and for whom Christ’s atonement was provided. While the Remonstrant position may seem to

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12. For treatments of the sincere and well-meant offer of the gospel in Reformed theology, including a consideration of its consistency with particular election and redemption, see John Murray, “The Free Offer of the Gospel,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:114-31; John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 1:107-32; Robert Lewis Dabney, “God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy As Related to His Power, Wisdom, and Sincerity,” in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982 [1891]), 1:282-313; and Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 107-25.

13. “Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save” (*The Opinions of the Remonstrants*, in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. De Jong, 265).

repudiate a proud Pelagianism, which ascribes salvation to human merit, it retains the root error of all Pelagian and semi-Pelagian views: what ultimately accounts for the salvation of some persons is their free choice to cooperate with, or not resist, the call of the gospel. The Remonstrant view fails to strip away the proud boast of those who believe their salvation depends ultimately upon something they do in response to the gospel call, which is always able to be rendered ineffectual by the sinner's unwillingness to believe. In reply to such pride, the Canons offer a resounding "no"!

No, it [true conversion] must be credited to God: just as from eternity he chose his own in Christ, so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance, and, having rescued them from the dominion of darkness, brings them into the kingdom of his Son, in order that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into the marvelous light, and may boast not in themselves, but the Lord, as apostolic words frequently testify in Scripture. (Art.10)

In the remaining articles of the Third and Fourth Main Points, the Canons present an account of the Spirit's work in conversion that emphasizes the effectual calling of the elect through the Spirit's use of the gospel and the ordinary means of grace. What the Remonstrant view fails to acknowledge is that God's grace is not only preventive and necessary, but also effectual to the conversion of all those whom God has elected to salvation. When the Holy Spirit works with the Word, he not only enlightens the mind to understand the gospel but

he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds. (Art. 11)

The work of the Spirit in conversion is, accordingly, a supernatural and incomprehensible activity, which goes beyond a mere "moral persuasion" or illumination of the mind (Art. 12).<sup>14</sup> "All those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active" (Art. 12).

Though the Canons' teaching on the work of the Spirit in regeneration and conversion is often described as "irresistible grace," this language does not capture

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14. The Canons at this point are responding to the Arminian tendency to grant priority to the intellect over the will and affections in the sinner's response to the gospel. The priority of the intellect in relation to the affections and will allows for the view that the movement of the will toward God is an act motivated by the intellect rather than by God's effectual grace. On this topic, see Richard A. Muller, "The Priority of the Intellect in the Soteriology of Jacob Arminius," *Westminster Theological Journal* 55/1 (1993): 55-72.

well the way they describe the concurrence between the Spirit's work and the responsible engagement of those whom the Spirit effectually calls. The teaching of the Canons assumes that, absent the powerful and effectual working of the Holy Spirit in conversion, all sinners would invariably resist the gospel's call to faith and repentance. However, when the Spirit regenerates and effectually grants faith and repentance to believers, he works in a powerful, yet non-coercive way to draw them to turn to God. The "divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and — in a manner at once pleasing and powerful — bends it back" (Art. 16). The gracious work of the Holy Spirit restores and liberates the will of believers so that they willingly and gladly embrace the gospel promise by faith. Furthermore, the work of the Spirit ordinarily takes place by the use of the means of grace, especially the gospel Word concerning Christ (Art. 17). In his wisdom, God has appointed the Word to be "the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul." By means of the gospel Word, the administration of the sacraments, and discipline, God is pleased by the work of his Spirit to grant faith and advance his saving purpose. For this reason, all the glory for the salvation of fallen sinners is owed to God whose Spirit alone effectually grants believers what the gospel call demands. No place is left for believers to think that their own free choice to believe is what ultimately causes them to be distinguished from others (Art. 15).

#### 2.4. Assurance in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints

The Canons' teaching regarding the effectual work of the Spirit in granting faith and repentance to those whom he saves has far-reaching implications for the question of assurance. However, these implications are spelled out most fully in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine, "The Perseverance of the Saints." In the Fifth Point, we discover the most extensive affirmations in the Canons regarding the assurance of salvation. These affirmations capture in summary form the way the authors of the Canons view the correlation between the doctrine of election and the believer's assurance of salvation.

#### The Perseverance and Preservation of the Saints: Articles 1-9

To set the stage for their teaching on the topic of the perseverance of the saints, the Fifth Main Point begins with several articles that describe the actual experience of believers in their struggle with remaining sin. Though believers are by God's grace and the Spirit of regeneration freed from "the reign and slavery of sin," they do not find complete victory from the flesh and sin in this life (Art. 1). Until believers are perfected in holiness by the work of the Spirit of Christ, they find that they continue to sin daily and to fall short of that perfect obedience that is required of them in the law of God (Art. 2). In this way, believers are continually taught to humbly acknowledge their weakness, to take refuge in Christ for forgiveness, to put to death the flesh, and to pursue growth in holiness by praying in the Holy Spirit and straining toward the goal of perfection (Art. 2). Believers are also reminded that they depend

wholly upon God's gracious and faithful preservation whereby he mercifully strengthens them "in the grace once conferred on them" and powerfully preserves them in this grace to the end (Art. 3). Without God's steadfast mercy in preserving them, believers would not be able to stand for a moment. Indeed, it is even possible for true believers to be permitted by God to fall into serious sins, when they fail to be vigilant and to pray that they not be led into temptation. When true believers fall into such sins, they greatly offend God, grieve his Spirit, and sometimes even lose for a time the awareness of God's favor until they return to him in repentance (Art. 5).

In the context of their description of the struggle believers experience with remaining sin in their lives, the Canons provide a comprehensive account of their gracious preservation by God. In Article 6 of the Fifth Main Point, the authors describe God's saving intervention and preservation of those whom he has chosen to save:

For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin.

The burden of this affirmation is that believers are only able to persevere in the Christian life as they are preserved by God. Left to themselves, believers would not be able to remain steadfast in their profession to the end. But believers are not left to themselves in the course of their life. God, who in his unfathomable mercy chose them in Christ for salvation, will not abandon his gracious purpose toward them. Nor will he leave them without the aid and comfort of his indwelling Spirit, the same Spirit who through the Word of the gospel effectually called them to faith in and fellowship with Christ, the Mediator. As the following Article declares, God preserves in them the imperishable seed by which he first gave them birth (Art. 7). Through the same means whereby God initially brought them into fellowship with himself, the Word and Spirit, God will "certainly and effectively" renew unto repentance those who have fallen into sin.

Because the perseverance of believers stems from God's gracious work of preservation, the authors of the Canons follow their affirmation about preservation with a resounding affirmation of its certainty:

So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit cannot neither be invalidated nor wiped out. (Art. 8)

In this Article, all of the main themes of the Canons' teaching regarding God's unconditional election in Christ are echoed. The certainty of the perseverance of the saints finds its sure ground in the purposes and works of the triune God himself: God the Father in his eternal and unchangeable decision to save them in Christ; God the Son in his work as Mediator, making atonement for their sins and acquiring for them all the benefits of his saving work; and God the Spirit who works effectually through the Word to grant them perseverance in faith and repentance. The doctrine of unconditional election inseparably joins together both God's glory as the Author of salvation and his people's comfort as the beneficiaries of his saving work.

#### The Assurance of Perseverance and Preservation: Articles 10-15

Not surprisingly, after affirming the certainty of the preserving grace of God, the Fifth Main Point follows with several articles that affirm the assurance believers may have regarding their election and salvation, including their preservation in God's grace. In these articles, we discover the most significant statements in the Canons regarding the topic of the assurance of salvation.

While recognizing that believers are assured of their preservation "in accordance with the measure of their faith," the Canons insist that they "can and do become assured," being confident "that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sin and eternal life" (Art. 9). Such assurance does not stem from "some private revelation beyond or outside of the Word" of God (Art. 10). Rather, it is based upon the rich promises of the gospel, the testimony of the Spirit with our spirits, and the fruits of the Spirit's work, namely, faith and the pursuit of good works. Upon the basis of these considerations, believers have a "well-founded comfort that the victory will be theirs" and a "reliable guarantee of eternal glory."<sup>15</sup> In the formulation of the grounds for the assurance of salvation in this Article, it is significant that the first two grounds, the promises of the gospel that are "plentifully revealed" in God's Word for our comfort and the testimony of the Holy Spirit with our spirit (Rom. 8:16-17), belong properly to what are termed the *a priori* foundations of assurance. They concern the objective basis of the believer's confidence before God, the reliable promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Spirit's testimony to these promises. Though the Canons return to an emphasis that we noted previously in I/12, which speaks of the "unmistakeable fruits of election," it is clear that the consideration of the fruits of election at this point is subordinate to the objective basis for assurance in the gospel Word. The presence of such marks of election and salvation derives from the gospel promise itself, namely, that those whom God elects, he also calls, justifies, and glorifies.

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15. The grounds of assurance in this Article are remarkably similar to those set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 18.2, which affirms that a true believer may have an "infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption."

In the remaining articles of the Fifth Point, the Canons provide an account of the way the assurance of preservation expresses itself in the course of the Christian life. Recalling an earlier acknowledgement of the struggle with doubt that some believers experience in the course of their life, the Canons admit that believers occasionally have to contend “with various doubts of the flesh” (Art. 11). Indeed, there may be times when believers do not enjoy the “full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance.” Nevertheless, we may be confident that at no time will God the Father permit them to be tempted beyond their ability to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13). We may be sure that in due time God will revive in them the assurance of their preservation by the work of his Holy Spirit. Contrary to the charge of Arminius and the Remonstrants that such assurance encourages “carelessness,” the Canons insist that it encourages believers to humbly depend upon God’s gracious work (Art. 12-13). Reflection upon the work of God in graciously preserving his people stimulates believers “to a serious and continual practice of thanksgiving and good works,” and to a “much greater concern to observe carefully the ways of the Lord which he prepared in advance.” By the same means that God uses to draw believers to himself through faith in Christ, he also preserves them:

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments. (Art. 14)

Believers do not enjoy or grow in assurance in any other way than through the ordinary use of those means God has appointed to save his people. In the closing article of the Fifth Point, the Canons commend the teaching of the assurance of preservation as a teaching loved by the bride of Christ, cherished as a priceless treasure, and aimed at ascribing all glory in salvation to God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Art. 15).

#### The Errors of the Remonstrants on Assurance

In the Rejection of Errors on the topic of perseverance, the Canons refute several features of the Remonstrant position. The first of these errors is the teaching that perseverance is a “condition” of the new covenant, which genuine believers are not promised “as an effect of election or a gift of God produced by Christ’s death” (I). According to the Remonstrants, in the same way that election and salvation are dependent upon free will, so perseverance in the way of faith depends upon the “choice of man’s will whether or not he perseveres” (II). The Remonstrants falsely teach that true believers, who once enjoyed salvation and new birth by the work of Christ’s Spirit, can and often do “forfeit” their salvation by failing to remain steadfast in faith and obedience (III). Such believers can commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, and as a result fall from the state of grace and salvation (IV). Perhaps one of the most objectionable features of the Remonstrants’ teaching is the claim that “the assurance of perseverance and of salvation is by its very nature and character an opiate of the flesh and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayer, and other exercises” (VI).

Rather than enjoying the comfort of the assurance of perseverance, the Remonstrants falsely teach that doubt regarding such perseverance is more “praiseworthy,” since it militates against carelessness and excessive confidence regarding the promise of salvation.

### 3. Concluding Reflections on the Canons’ Doctrine of Assurance

My summary of the Canons’ teaching regarding the assurance of election and salvation demonstrates that its authors were keenly aware of the Arminian claim that the Reformed doctrine of election encourages either careless security or despair. The arguments of Arminius and his followers clearly form the background to the way the Canons address the topic of assurance. If the theme of God’s undeserved and merciful election of his people to salvation is the principal teaching of the Canons, the theme of the comfort and encouragement this affords believers is its inseparable companion. The praise that belongs wholly to God in the salvation of the elect is at the same time the source of great comfort to believers who embrace the promise of salvation in Christ. Such comfort does not encourage carelessness. What it encourages is humility born out of the awareness of God’s undeserved grace in Christ, as well as grateful use of the ordinary means God is pleased to use to save those whom he has chosen.

In the light of my overview of the historic debates regarding the topic of assurance of election and salvation, as well as my summary of the Canons’ teaching, I wish to conclude this essay with a few reflections on their teaching. These reflections aim to locate the Canons’ teaching in their historical context as a response to Arminius’ followers, and to show that they offer a compelling criticism of the way Arminius’ teaching undermines true assurance. These reflections will also address and refute some aspects of the arguments of more recent criticisms of the Canons, including those of Barth and Kendall.

#### 3.1. Interpreting the Canons’ in Their Historical and Pastoral Context

Before turning to more theological aspects of the topic of assurance in the Canons, I want to begin by illustrating how the Canons reflect throughout a profound historical and pastoral sensitivity to the accusations of Arminius and his followers against the Reformed doctrine of election. Any evaluation of the Canons’ teaching on assurance must bear in mind the historical and pastoral context in which they were written. There are several ways in which this becomes evident.

In the first place, it is important to recognize that the Arminian party and the authors of the Canons shared the conviction that the doctrine of election, properly understood, ought to encourage an appropriate assurance of salvation. Contrary to the predominant teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which reserved the assurance of salvation to those whose election was confirmed by a special revelation of God’s grace, both the Arminian and Reformed parties aimed to uphold the Reformation consensus that true believers ordinarily ought to have an assurance of their salvation

through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Even though they ultimately diverged widely in their understanding of the doctrine of election, it must not be forgotten that the Arminian party arose within the context of a Reformed church where the assurance of election and salvation was prized. When Arminius and the Remonstrants proposed a reformulation of the predominant Reformed view of election, they did so in significant measure in order to provide a secure basis for such assurance. One of the principal motives underlying the controversy between the Remonstrants and the Reformed authors of the Canons was the desire to provide a more sure footing for the cultivation of such assurance.

The importance of this historical and pastoral context for interpreting the Canons becomes evident at any number of points in the Canons. For example, when the topic of assurance is first addressed in the First Main Point of Doctrine, the authors acknowledge that believers do not always experience the same degree of assurance (Art. I/13). With this acknowledgement, the Canons exhibit a remarkable pastoral sensitivity. When believers lack full assurance, they should not conclude that this calls into question the genuineness of their faith or imperils their salvation. Though true faith ordinarily produces such assurance, the Canons here and elsewhere acknowledge the struggle believers sometimes experience in cultivating such assurance. Furthermore, when the Canons offer a distinction between a false assurance, which makes God's children "lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured," and a true assurance that does not take the grace of election "for granted" or "engage in idle and brazen talk about it" (Art. I/13), they are responding to the Arminian concern regarding a "careless certainty." The burden of these articles is undoubtedly to refute the misrepresentation of the Reformed view by Arminius and his followers. The intention of the authors of the Canons to respond to the Remonstrants' accusations is further confirmed by the important addition of Article I/17, which addresses the assurance godly parents may have regarding the election and salvation of their children who die in infancy.

Similarly, in the Second, Third, and Fourth Main Points, the Canons do not merely affirm the Scriptural teachings regarding particular redemption, radical depravity, and effectual grace. They repeatedly turn to the implications of these teachings for the cultivation of assurance. Since the Arminian view of indefinite atonement denies the efficacy of Christ's atoning work for the salvation of any fallen sinner, believers are compelled to depend upon their own independent choice to believe in order to have any confidence of salvation. Furthermore, since the grace of the Spirit of Christ is sufficient to enable this choice but ineffectual actually to grant it, believers are once again left to their own resources to obtain any confidence regarding God's grace toward them. Since the promises of the gospel are "conditional" upon the evangelical

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16. The traditional Roman Catholic view that assurance is only granted to a few believers, and that by way of "special revelation," is set forth in Chapter 12 of the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent on justification: "No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate ... for except by special revelation, it can not be known whom God hath chosen unto himself" (Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* [1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], 1:103).

work of persevering and obedient faith, fallen sinners are left to themselves in respect to the actual possession and retention of what is promised. Although the Canons do not deny the struggle that believers sometimes have to gain full assurance of salvation, they are keen throughout to demonstrate the pastoral implications of their teaching for such assurance.

Perhaps nowhere in the Canons is their pastoral sensitivity regarding the topic of assurance more evident than in the Fifth Main Point. For obvious reasons, this Point allows the authors of the Canons to make their most comprehensive statements about the relation between the biblical teaching of gracious election and the assurance that believers may have regarding their salvation. The sensitivity of the Canons to the accusations of the Remonstrants is especially evident in the way this Point distinguishes between the assurance of the perseverance of the saints and a casual presumption regarding salvation.<sup>17</sup> In the Fifth Main Point, the Canons take pains to respond to the charge of the Remonstrants that the Reformed doctrine of election encourages an antinomianism where believers can enjoy assurance of preservation without using the ordinary means of grace or evidencing the fruits of God's saving grace in their life and conduct. For this reason, they stress the importance of humble reliance upon the Spirit's use of the Word and sacraments, which encourage, admonish, and discipline believers so as to ensure their preservation unto salvation in glory.

### 3.2. The Grounds for True Assurance

In the course of their response to the Arminian claim that the Reformed doctrine of election undermines true assurance, the Canons principal aim is to demonstrate how the Reformed view offers a sure basis for assurance. At the same time, the Canons argue that the Arminian view ultimately leaves believers without any true assurance because their salvation depends upon something that ultimately cannot be known, namely, that they will persevere in faith to the end. The difference between the Reformed and Arminian views finally concerns the grounds that they present for assurance.

Though the Canons do not expressly employ the theological language of *a priori* and *a posteriori* grounds (including the so-called *syllogismus practicus*) for assurance, they clearly identify these two types of grounds in their treatment of the topic of assurance. In some places, the Canons undeniably appeal to the subjective experience of believers, who find assurance of their salvation when they witness in themselves the "unmistakable fruits of election" (Art. I/12; V/10). Without using the theological language of *a posteriori* grounds or the practical syllogism, the Canons undoubtedly grant that they play a role in the cultivation of assurance. However, it is critically important to recognize that these subjective grounds are subordinate to the more important objective or *a priori* grounds for assurance. Throughout the Canons, the

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17. For this reason, the Canons use the language, "the *perseverance* of the saints," rather than the language "eternal security," which is often used in contemporary evangelical theology. The Canons language deliberately responds to the Arminian caricature that the Reformed view encourages carelessness. The language of "eternal security" does not serve this purpose well.

assurance of election and salvation are repeatedly founded upon the objective work of the Triune God whose immutable purpose of election cannot be thwarted or frustrated. Upon the grounds of the gracious working of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, believers may enjoy a full assurance of final salvation in glory. Such assurance does not ultimately rest upon what believers witness in themselves as a confirmation of God's gracious work. It rests upon confidence in God's unfailing mercy and invincible grace. When believers discover evidences of God's gracious work in them, they do not rest their confidence upon them. Rather, these evidences are viewed as fruits of election, which find their ultimate source in the gracious and saving work of the Triune God.

According to the teaching of the Canons, the objective and *a priori* grounds for the believer's assurance of election and salvation consist of God's gracious and unconditional purpose of election in Christ, the provision of atonement for the elect in Christ's work as Mediator, and the effectual application of the benefits of Christ's work as Mediator by the Holy Spirit through the Word of the gospel. Upon the basis of the Father's immutable and eternal purpose to save his people in and through Christ, the Son's effective atonement on their behalf, and the Spirit's conversion of those whom God effectually calls according to his saving purpose, believers have sufficient grounds to be assured of their election and salvation. Rather than depending upon their own resources and steadfastness in freely choosing to persevere in the way of faith and repentance, the salvation of the elect rests securely in the unfailing and invincible working of God's grace in the life and conduct of all true believers. Nowhere is this sure, objective ground for the believer's assurance of salvation more eloquently expressed than in Article V/8, which grounds the believer's assurance of preservation unto glory in the invincible working of the Triune God: "... his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out."

Although these objective and *a priori* grounds constitute the ultimate foundation for the assurance of election and salvation, the Canons are also very clear in rejecting what they call an "inquisitive searching into the hidden things of God" (Art. I/12). Rather than inquisitively searching into the hidden things of God in order to be assured of their salvation, the Canons direct believers to consider how God reveals his grace in Christ through the promises of the Word and ministry of the Spirit of Christ. For this reason, when addressing the question of assurance with respect to the children of believers who die in infancy, the judgment parents should make in their case rests entirely upon the gracious promise God makes to them in his Word. Parents of such children have a sufficient and reliable basis for assurance in the promises of the covenant of grace, which they are to embrace with a confidence that excludes all doubting. Likewise, when the Canons offer their most complete statement of the grounds of assurance, they begin with "the promises of God which he has very plentifully revealed in his Word for our comfort" (Art. V/10). Believers obtain assurance when they embrace the reliable promises of salvation in Christ, whose work of atonement infallibly ensures their salvation and whose Spirit effectually communicates the saving benefits of his work to them.

Therefore, when the Canons' acknowledge what may be called the *a posteriori* or subjective grounds of assurance, it is critically important to recognize that these grounds only serve a subordinate and secondary role in the cultivation of assurance. They provide no full assurance without a proper understanding of their relation to God's objective purpose of election and the means he chooses to use in accomplishing this purpose. Precisely because God's grace in Christ is communicated through the gospel Word and the effectual working of the Spirit, the Canons acknowledge the legitimacy of considering such subjective and *a posteriori* evidences of God's gracious work in obtaining assurance. However, these subjective evidences are not presented as the principal or sufficient grounds for the assurance of salvation. Such subjective grounds only provide an occasion for growth in assurance when they are placed within the framework of a clear understanding of the objective grounds that undergird them. Because God's purpose of election includes the provision of Christ's atonement for those whom he chooses to save, and because this provision includes the effectual communication of Christ and his benefits to those whom the Spirit effectually calls, believers may infer from such subjective grounds that they are those whom God has called according to his gracious purpose. Accordingly, when the Canons speak of the "unmistakable fruits of election," these fruits confirm the teaching of God's Word in Romans 8:30 and other passages. Since Christ's work of atonement unfailingly secures all the benefits of salvation, including saving faith and the beginnings of new obedience, those who embrace the gospel promise and gratefully seek to live in a way that pleases God may be assured that they are in Christ and genuinely heirs of the gospel promise.

Whereas the Reformed doctrine of election provides a sure basis for assurance, the Canons demonstrate convincingly that the Arminian view offers no such basis. Stated theologically, there are no true objective and *a priori* grounds for assurance on the Arminian position. Because God's purpose of election is conditioned upon the free choice of some to believe, the general love and saving intention of God toward all fallen sinners offers no real basis for true assurance of salvation. Likewise, because God's provision for the salvation of all fallen sinners in Christ's work of atonement is merely provisional, it promises salvation only to those who freely choose to respond to it by performing a work of their own, namely, evangelical faith. God's purpose of election and provision of Jesus Christ as Mediator do not ensure the salvation of a single fallen sinner. Nor does God's electing favor or the work of Christ ensure that any fallen sinners, who may choose to believe for a season, will persevere in the way of faith and be saved in glory. Thus, the fatal consequences of the Arminian view for true assurance become most evident in respect to the question of the perseverance of the saints. The Arminian position is compelled to acknowledge that the only assurance believers can have is a *present* assurance that they are saved. But the Arminian position cannot say that believers have any gospel promise that they will continue to believe in the future. From the vantage part of Arminianism, such an assurance of preservation by God's grace necessarily produces carelessness and laxity. Ultimately, in the Arminian view, the only grounds for assurance are purely subjective, and bear no integral relation to God's unailing purpose of election and effectual grace. Consequently, the Arminian view of assurance does not differ materially from the Roman Catholic doctrine of "moral conjecture."

### 3.3. An Evaluation of Barth's and Kendall's Criticisms of the Canons

Upon the basis of these reflections regarding the Canons' pastoral teaching on the topic of assurance, several observations may be made regarding Barth and Kendall's criticisms of the Canons' teaching.

While Barth and Kendall correctly recognize that the Canons appeal to what I have termed *a posteriori* or subjective grounds for assurance, they exaggerate the role of these grounds in the Canons' teaching. As I have argued, the Canons do not teach that the assurance of salvation ultimately rests upon the unmistakable fruits of election that believers witness in themselves. Such fruits of election merely confirm what believers know upon the basis of God's Word concerning his electing purpose and the way that purpose is realized in time through the atoning work of Christ and the ministry of the Spirit. Contrary to Barth's and Kendall's claims, the Canons ascribe a role to these grounds that is secondary and subordinate to the role played by the *a priori* and objective grounds to warrant full assurance of final salvation. According to the Canons, full assurance can finally only be warranted upon grounds that focus upon the gracious purpose and work of the Triune God.<sup>18</sup>

Barth's and Kendall's misinterpretations of the Canons largely derive from their failure to read them in their historical context as a response to the common Arminian complaint against a careless certainty of salvation. When the Canons speak of a subordinate role for the fruits of election in the cultivation of assurance, they are clearly motivated by a desire to answer the common Arminian complaint against the Reformed view. According to the Remonstrants, the Reformed view encourages believers to be confident of their election and salvation, even when they demonstrate a careless indifference regarding the genuineness or fruitfulness of their faith. In order to respond to this common complaint, the Canons insist that their teaching on assurance is utterly incompatible with such carelessness or antinomianism. Because those whom God elects in Christ are saved in time by the work of Christ as Mediator and the ministry of his Spirit and Word, true assurance of salvation is inconsistent with carelessness regarding the conduct of believers. Christ's work of atonement ensures that all who embrace the gospel promises in him will enjoy every benefit of his saving work through the Spirit, including faith and all "other saving gifts" of the Holy Spirit (Art. II/8). Those who are called according to God's purpose of election are effectually granted faith and repentance, and will finally be presented before God as "a glorious

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18. Though I do not believe the Canons of Dort or the Westminster Confession of Faith are guilty of making subjective and experiential considerations the principal ground for the assurance of salvation, I am not arguing that this did not occur within some branches of later Calvinism or Puritanism, including proponents of the so-called *Nadere Reformatie* ("Nearer Reformation") in the Netherlands. For a broad overview of the *Nadere Reformatie*, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1999), "Appendix: The Dutch Second Reformation," 286-309. Though Beeke acknowledges the greater role ascribed to the use of the practical syllogism among advocates of what he calls the "Dutch Second Reformation," he tends to downplay the extent to which they sometimes diverged from the more balanced approach of the classic confessions of the Reformed tradition.

people, without spot or wrinkle” (Art. II/8). When the Canons appeal to the fruits of election and the good works that faith produces as a confirmation of the believer’s election in grace, they do not do so to rest salvation upon faith and the work faith produces. Faith and the works faith produces are themselves but the effects of the invincible work of God’s grace in those whom he elects to save. In this respect, the Canons teaching concurs with that of Calvin, who likewise taught that assurance may be aided by a consideration of those works that necessarily and inseparably accompany true faith as a fruit of the work of Christ’s Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

The last observation I wish to make regarding Barth’s and especially Kendall’s criticisms has to do with the implication of the doctrine of definite atonement (or particular redemption) for the assurance of salvation. Though Barth and Kendall argue that this doctrine undermines any basis for assurance, the Canons maintain that it actually provides the most compelling ground for a robust assurance of salvation. When believers respond to the gracious offer of salvation through faith in Christ, they embrace Christ as the Mediator who has fully satisfied for all their sins. They do not embrace a gospel promise that is merely conditional and provisional, as though Christ were not the one whose work of atonement ensures the salvation of those who entrust themselves to him in faith. No, they embrace Christ by faith, trusting that he has not only procured their right to be saved but will also ensure that every benefit belonging to salvation is imparted to them. To use the language of the author of Hebrews, believers trust that Christ is able to save them to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25). Christ does not simply make it possible for them to be saved, provided they persist in choosing to believe in him. No, Christ’s work promises those who believe in him all that is necessary to enjoy full and final salvation. The benefits of Christ’s atonement include not only the gift of faith itself but also all the saving gifts Christ unfailingly imparts to believers by his Holy Spirit. Among these benefits are the gifts of persevering faith and genuine conversion. Therefore, nothing in the Canons’ teaching regarding Christ’s definite and particular work of salvation undermines their teaching regarding the believer’s assurance of election and salvation. The doctrine of particular redemption constitutes a significant ground for such assurance.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 272-73: “Both Calvin and Beza identify Christ as the primary foundation of assurance, and both identify calling and sanctification as indications that one is in Christ. Indeed, Calvin’s language of Christ as *speculum electionis* [“mirror of election”] appears to point not only to the individual believer looking to Christ as a ground of assurance but also to God looking to Christ and his righteousness as the fundamental divine consideration of those in union with him. In other words, looking to calling and sanctification as grounds of assurance is not looking elsewhere than to Christ.”

20. John Murray makes this point more eloquently than I can: “He [Christ] could not be offered as Savior and as the one who embodies in himself salvation full and free if he had simply made the salvation of all men possible or merely had made provision for the salvation of all. It is the very doctrine that Christ procured and secured redemption that invests the free offer of the gospel with richness and power. It is that doctrine alone that allows for a presentation of Christ that will be worthy of the glory of his accomplishment and of his person. It is because Christ procured and secured redemption that he is an all-sufficient and suitable Savior” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015 (1955)], 63-64).

One of the ironies of Kendall's and Barth's criticisms of the doctrine of definite atonement is that their own doctrine of universal atonement does not warrant an objective, indubitable basis for assurance on the part of all those for whom Christ died. Neither Kendall nor Barth teaches that all fallen sinners will actually be saved, even though they clearly teach that Christ's atoning death was designed to provide for the salvation of all. Both Kendall and Barth correctly acknowledge that faith is necessary in order for believers to obtain the benefits of Christ's work of atonement. Though Kendall insists that Christ died for all sinners, he also insists that only those for whom Christ intercedes and to whom he grants faith through the ministry of his Spirit are actually saved. Similarly, while Barth's view seems to entail that all are saved by virtue of their election in Christ and his reconciling work on their behalf, he ultimately refuses to draw this conclusion and speaks of the "impossible possibility" of persistent unbelief. For both Kendall and Barth, therefore, the fact that Christ atoned for all fallen sinners does not warrant indifference regarding the question whether or not the gospel promise is embraced by faith. Only those who embrace the gospel by faith and conduct themselves accordingly enjoy actual fellowship with Christ and the assurance of God's favor. Without true faith and its unmistakable fruits, no one can have any sure confidence regarding God's or even enjoy the promise of salvation in Christ. In short, because Kendall and Barth do not affirm the actual salvation of all those for whom Christ died, they are not able to sustain their claim that the cultivation of assurance can take place apart from any attention (however subordinate and secondary) to what belongs to true faith and its unmistakable fruits.

The problem Kendall and Barth face at this point can be stated differently. Because they do not teach an actual universalism, they are not able to show how their doctrine of universal atonement solves the problem of assurance in a way that the traditional Reformed view cannot. If some for whom Christ died are not saved because of their incorrigible unbelief, Christ's death on their behalf offers no comfort to them. If the benefits of Christ's death on their behalf can be frustrated or thwarted through their persistent unbelief, the universal scope of his atonement provides no sufficient grounds for the assurance of their salvation. A universal atonement that does not actually ensure the salvation of those for whom it was designed cannot serve as a foundation for true assurance. In comparison to the views of Kendall and Barth, the Canons' teaching of definite atonement compares rather favorably. For on the Canons' view, when believers put their trust in Christ, they do so in the confidence that they have been called according to God's unending purpose to save them through the atoning work of Christ. They may have the assurance that Christ's work on their behalf was not in vain. They may be confident that Christ's Spirit will unendingly communicate to them every saving benefit, including a persevering faith, that was secured for them by his work as Mediator.