

Is the Saving Grace of God Resistible?

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SUMMARY

This article compares two influential accounts concerning whether the saving grace of God is resistible, one offered by theologians following the Synod of Dordrecht, and the other the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account. I argue that Dort’s account is inconsistent with the love of God as manifested by the extent of the atonement, but this

problem does not arise on the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account. I show that the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account is consistent with what the Scriptures say concerning human depravity, the atonement, as well as divine sovereignty, omnipotence, freedom, election, love and grace. I conclude that the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account is to be preferred.

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RÉSUMÉ

L’auteur compare deux positions influentes sur la question de savoir si la grâce divine en vue du salut est irrésistible, celle des théologiens qui adhèrent aux canons de Dordrecht, et celle qui fait intervenir la « connaissance moyenne ». Il plaide que la position du synode de Dordrecht n’est pas compatible avec l’affirmation de l’amour de Dieu telle qu’il se révèle par la portée de

l’expiation, alors que ce problème disparaît lorsqu’on fait appel à une « connaissance moyenne ». Il tente de montrer que faire intervenir la « connaissance moyenne » est compatible avec l’enseignement scripturaire sur la corruption humaine, l’expiation, ainsi que sur la souveraineté et l’omnipotence de Dieu, la liberté, l’élection, l’amour et la grâce. Il en conclut à l’avantage de la position faisant appel à une « connaissance moyenne ».

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel vergleicht zwei einflussreiche Meinungen in bezug auf die Frage, ob man der rettenden Gnade Gottes widerstehen kann oder nicht. Die eine Meinung wurde von Theologen in Anlehnung an die Synode von Dordrecht verfasst, bei der anderen geht es um die sogenannte Darstellung vom ‘Mittleren Wissen’. Mein Argument besagt, dass Dorts Position nicht mit der Liebe Gottes im Einklang steht, wie sie sich durch die

Reichweite der Erlösung erwiesen hat. Dieses Problem stellt sich hingegen bei der These vom ‘Mittleren Wissen’ nicht. Ich werde darlegen, dass die Aussage vom ‘Mittleren Wissen’ mit dem übereinstimmt, was die Schrift über Themen wie menschliche Dekadenz, Erlösung und göttliche Souveränität, wie auch Allmacht, Freiheit, Auserwählung, Liebe und Gnade aussagt. Als Schlussfolgerung ergibt sich, dass die Darstellung vom ‘Mittleren Wissen’ vorzuziehen ist.

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Introduction

Can humans resist the saving grace of God? Theologians with different accounts of divine providence would answer this question differently. In this article I shall compare two influential accounts, one offered by theologians following the Synod of Dordrecht and the other the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account. The first account is well known among theologians. The second account has been widely discussed in recent philosophical literature¹ but there is a lack of detailed theological

and scriptural assessment of it in comparison with Dort’s account in recent non-Roman Catholic academic theological literature. This is a pity because, as I shall show in the rest of this article, the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account has important insights to offer to the academic theologian with respect to a number of difficult theological issues concerning divine providence, and it is demonstrably superior to Dort’s account. I shall argue that the Synod of Dort’s answer to the opening question of this essay is inconsistent with the love of God as manifested

by the extent of the atonement; by contrast, the answer given by the 'Middle Knowledge' account is not inconsistent. I will then go on to consider a number of objections that theologians following Dort would raise against the 'Middle Knowledge' account, in particular the objections related to human depravity, the atonement, as well as divine sovereignty, omnipotence, freedom, election, love and grace, and I shall show that these objections can be adequately addressed. My arguments will take seriously what the Christian Scriptures have to say on these issues, as Dordrecht's theologians would.

Problems with the account of Dordrecht

The Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) was an assembly of the Dutch Reformed Church convened at Dordrecht (a city also known as Dordt or Dort) by the States-General to deal with the Arminian controversy. In addition to about 100 Dutch participants there were also some 30 representatives of churches in England, Scotland, Switzerland and the German territories. The Synod passed five articles or Canons asserting unconditional election, a limited atonement, the total depravity of humanity, the irresistibility of grace and the final perseverance of the saints.² In the English speaking world these articles have become known as the Five Points of Calvinism, although there has been some controversy as to whether they truly represent the views of Calvin himself.³ Theologians following Dordrecht hold that humans⁴ are totally depraved and worthy of eternal damnation, and that no one can freely choose to receive God's offer of salvation without God's enabling grace. As 'The Decision of the Synod of Dordrecht' (hereafter Dort) states,

Therefore, all people are 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 they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.⁵

Dort also holds that God grants an irresistible grace to certain elected humans, but not to the 'reprobates' who would eventually perish.⁶ This grace is understood as a certain influence that compels a person to receive God's offer of salvation and that is mediated by the Holy Spirit. As

Dort explains,

In this way, therefore, faith is a gift of God, not in the sense that it is offered by God for man to choose, but that it is in actual fact bestowed on man, breathed and infused into him. Nor is it a gift in the sense that God bestows only the potential to believe, but then awaits assent – the act of believing – from man's choice; rather, it is a gift in the sense that he who works both willing and acting and, indeed, works all things in all people produces in man both the will to believe and the belief itself.⁷

And Dort rejects those

Who teach that the grace by which we are converted to God is nothing but a gentle persuasion ... who teach that God in regenerating man does not bring to bear that power of his omnipotence whereby he may powerfully and unfailingly bend man's will to faith and conversion ... who teach that grace and free choice are concurrent partial causes which cooperate to initiate conversion, and that grace does not precede – in the order of causality – the effective influence of the will; that is to say, that God does not effectively help man's will to come to conversion before man's will itself motivates and determines itself.⁸

The Decision maintains that humans ultimately have no part to play in determining whether or not they accept Christ as their Saviour and that a person's coming to salvation is totally of God. In other words, God is the sole determiner of whether a person turns to him for salvation or not; this view is known as Monergism. As Dort states,

But the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve his choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation.⁹

This differs from the 'Middle Knowledge' account described below, which affirms that humans have a non-meritorious part to play in determining their coming to salvation. Theologians following Dordrecht would agree that a person has to accept Christ willingly, but they would insist that the gracious influence from God is the *sufficient cause* that determines their willing acceptance of Christ. Concerning scriptural passages such as 'And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely' (Revelation 22:17b), they would say that a person would be willing to take the water of life if and

only if God's gracious influence act upon them and this divine influence is the sufficient cause for making them willing.

The problem with Dort's account of irresistible grace is that, if this account were true, one could rightly ask: why does God not providentially apply this grace to every human so that every human would find him, given that God desires every human to find him (Acts 17:26–27)? Dordrecht's theologians, following Calvin and Augustine, would claim that the answer to the question as to why only certain people are elected is a divine mystery.¹⁰ However, such a reply would be ducking an issue that is problematic for their position, for there could only be three possibilities: the answer is either conditional on God or on humans or on creatures other than humans.

Theologians following Dort deny that God's election is conditional on anything intrinsic to humans; in particular, it is not based on any fore-known human response to God. But could it be conditional on other creatures such as angels or demons? According to the Scriptures, humans (including those who are regarded by Dort as reprobates) are the only creatures that are explicitly stated to be made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27); they are at the centre of God's purposes for creation.¹¹ Therefore, it is implausible that conditions intrinsic to other creatures could have caused God to refrain from electing a human made in his image to receive salvation.

Could the answer then be conditional on God alone? If this were so, it would be hard to square with the doctrine of unlimited atonement. According to this doctrine, God loves every single human so much that he sent his Son to die for each human. Some theologians deny this doctrine by citing scriptural passages such as Revelation 5:9, Hebrews 9:12, Titus 2:14, Ephesians 5:25, John 10:15, 15:13 and Acts 20:28, and claiming that Christ was sacrificed only for those who have been elected for salvation. In reply, these scriptural passages can be taken to mean that Christ died for the elect to make them redeemed, but these passages do not say that Christ died for the elect *only*.

On the other hand, there are Bible passages which imply that Christ died for the 'non-elect'. For example, 2 Peter 2:1 affirms that certain false prophets who would ultimately perish (and whom Dort's theologians would label as 'reprobates') deny 'the Master who bought them'. As New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham comments, Jesus is the Master who 'bought them (at the cost

of his death, it is implied – the only allusion to the cross in 2 Peter). This image of redemption as the transferral of slaves to new ownership was fairly common in early Christianity' (see 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; Revelation 5:9; 14:3–4, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 1:18–19).¹² 2 Peter 2:1 therefore implies that Jesus died to pay the price of redemption for the 'reprobates'. In denying the Master, these false prophets reject the payment that the Master had made and thus they would not enjoy the benefits of the Master's payment but would have to be punished for their sins.

The doctrine that Christ died for the non-elect is also more consistent with 1 Timothy 4:10, which says that God is the Saviour of all humans, and especially of those who believe. The 'all men' in this verse clearly refers to a larger group of people than 'those who believe', i.e. 'all men' includes those who would not believe (the 'reprobates'). This verse implies that God has done something for every person such that he can be deemed as the Saviour of 'all men',¹³ although only those who believe would receive the salvific benefits of what God has done. The 'something' which God has done for every person is evidently the death of Christ, as implied by the phrase 'the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' in an earlier passage of 1 Timothy (1 Timothy 2:5–6).

What the doctrine of unlimited atonement implies is that God deems the salvation of each human more precious than even the life of his Son. Given this doctrine, one wonders why, after giving his Son for certain people (the 'reprobates'), God would withhold from giving them his irresistible grace, as theologians following Dort asserts. What other considerations apart from those conditional on humans could God have deemed more important than even the life of his Son, such that he would refrain from granting his irresistible grace for securing their reception of his Son whom he had given for them? The answer is clearly, 'None'.¹⁴

The 'Middle Knowledge' account

The above difficulties disappear on a 'Middle Knowledge' account of divine providence. The doctrine of 'Middle Knowledge' (*scientia media*) was classically proposed by Luis de Molina (1535–1600), a Spanish Jesuit theologian of the Counter-Reformation and the author of the *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (1588).¹⁵ However, in recent years Protestant theologians have also utilised the doctrine of 'Middle

Knowledge' while affirming (against Molina) the Reformation doctrines of *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide* and *Solus Christus*.¹⁶ According to the doctrine of divine Middle Knowledge, God knows what any particular person would freely do in any circumstance. As Molina explains, Middle Knowledge is that

by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice, He saw in His own essence what each such faculty would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or in that or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things – even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.¹⁷

This knowledge is 'middle' in the sense that it is conceptually between God's natural knowledge (i.e. knowledge of all possibilities, including what any free creature *could* do in any set of circumstances) and God's free knowledge (God's knowledge of what are in fact true states of affairs in the actual world). According to Molina, God freely decreed to actualise a world known by him to be realisable on the basis of his Middle Knowledge.¹⁸

Molina formulated his view against his Dominican opponents who, like the Synod of Dort, held to a view of divine providence which affirms that God is the sole determiner of a person coming to salvation. In response, Molina argues:

If the method of predestining some adults and not others was the one that has been gleaned from the theory of these authors with their pre-determinations, then I do not see in what sense it is true that God wills all human beings to be saved if they themselves do not prevent it.¹⁹

Here, Molina assumes that there is a certain sense in which God wills all human beings to be saved. This is an assumption which theologians following Dort would deny, but it is a valid assumption given what has been explained in the previous section, namely the implications of the doctrine that Christ died for the non-elect. The above quotation also highlights one of the reasons why many theologians through the centuries have found it important to object to those accounts of divine providence which make God the sole determiner of a person coming to salvation, namely that it is inconsistent with a loving God who is 'the Saviour of all men' (1 Timothy 4:10; see above).

The 'Middle Knowledge' account could agree with Dort's theologians that, given humanity's depravity, no one can freely choose to receive

God's offer of salvation without God's enabling grace. However, the 'Middle Knowledge' account would include a crucial qualification that is denied by Dort. The 'Middle Knowledge' account would hold that God's enabling grace is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for a person's reception of God's offer of salvation. As Molina puts it,

The assistance through which we are helped by God toward justification is not efficacious intrinsically and by its nature; rather, its being efficacious depends on the free consent of the faculty of choice, a consent that the will is able not to give despite that assistance – indeed, when it consents, it is able to dissent.²⁰

This is in contrast with Dordrecht's account, which holds that God's enabling grace is a necessary *and* sufficient condition. In other words, Dort holds that only God determines a person's acceptance of Christ, whereas the 'Middle Knowledge' account holds that both God and a person have a part to play in determining their acceptance of Christ. This distinction is important in the argument because it allows the 'Middle Knowledge' account to avoid the aforementioned problem with Dort's account while affirming the need for divine enabling grace. The enabling grace is needed to counter the negative influences of the person's depravity, such as their sinful desires, corrupted thoughts and pride. In such a depraved state the person would have no real desire for God (Romans 3:11). Hence, no one could freely turn to God and receive Christ as Lord without God's aid (John 6:44, 1 Corinthians 12:3). On the 'Middle Knowledge' account which is being defended here, the enabling grace of God would cause humans to have the necessary desire for God by exerting on them certain influences and illuminating their minds through the work of the Holy Spirit, and then they could freely determine whether to respond positively to this desire, or to resist the Holy Spirit (as the Jews did in Acts 7:51).

Thus, with respect to the notion of irresistible grace, the 'Middle Knowledge' account would affirm that, in accordance with his desire to grant humans an element of determination in their reception of salvation, God has determined that each individual can accept or reject the gracious influence that is given to them. The 'Middle Knowledge' account would say, however, that there exists an *extrinsically* efficacious grace, understood as a gracious influence that is applied to individuals whom God foreknew would deter-

mine to accept it.²¹

Against the possibility of free will, it has been argued that God's foreknowledge determines the choices of creatures such that they could not choose otherwise (e.g. if God foreknows that Peter will choose to do A tomorrow, that Peter could not choose not to do A tomorrow). As Martin Luther explains,

If he (God) foreknows as he wills, then his will is eternal and unchanging (because it belongs to his nature), and if he wills as he foreknows, then his knowledge is eternal and unchanging (because it belongs to his nature). From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God.²²

In response to this theological fatalism, one can argue that foreknowledge is dependent on what creatures will freely choose to do (not vice versa) and foreknowledge in itself has no causal influence on what creatures will freely choose to do.²³ If God foreknows that Peter will freely choose to do A, Peter will freely choose to do A, but Peter can freely choose not to do A, and if Peter freely chooses not to do A God would have foreknown that Peter would choose not to do A. But Peter will not freely choose not to do A (even though he can freely choose not to do A); rather, Peter will freely choose to do, and that is why God foreknows that Peter will freely choose to do A. There is a possible world in which Peter will choose to do A and God foreknows that Peter will choose to do A, and there is a possible world that Peter will choose not to do A and God foreknows that Peter will choose not to do A. However, there is no possible world in which Peter will choose not to do A but God foreknows that Peter will choose to do A (and vice versa).

At this point, theologians following Dordrecht might object by pointing to scriptural passages which say that the outcome of events is determined by God (Proverbs 16:9, Jeremiah 10:23, etc) and that these events include the future acts of individuals (Isaiah 44:28).²⁴ For example, God determined that certain people would reject Jesus, including one of the Twelve whom Jesus predicted would betray him. However, such problems can easily be resolved on the 'Middle Knowledge' account. For according to this account, God has middle knowledge such that he knows how each

person would respond in any circumstance before they were even created.²⁵ Furthermore, God is the one who determined the time and place where each person would live (Acts 17: 26). From these considerations, the 'Middle Knowledge' account would respond that God placed a person whom he foreknew would determine to reject him to be born in first-century Palestine and that this person would eventually be one of the Twelve, i.e. Judas Iscariot. In a similar way, God could direct the heart of any particular person living at any particular point in time to accomplish his predetermined plan (cf. Proverbs 21:1). Therefore, the fact that the outcomes of events are determined by God does not point in favour of Dort's account over the 'Middle Knowledge' account.

On the 'Middle Knowledge' account, Judas cannot complain that his rejection of Christ was determined by God nor by the depravity that was ultimately traced back to Adam's fall. The reason is that the enabling grace which was needed to counter the negative influences of this depravity would have been given to him at some point in time, and his rejection of Christ was determined by himself. Thus, he ought to be punished for his sin. This result is consistent not only with God's justice but also with the scriptural account of God's love. For according to the 'Middle Knowledge' account, God has not withheld any necessary condition for the reception of salvation from those who would ultimately reject him. Rather, God loves these people (as well as believers) so much that he has given all of them the genuine ability to choose whether or not to accept him. It is reasonable to think that the consideration that God would have deemed more important than even the life of his Son, whom he gave up for every human being, would be something that is intrinsic to humans. The 'Middle Knowledge' account would affirm that this consideration is the human person's genuine freedom to choose. This affirmation would be consistent with the highest purpose that God has for humanity, which is to have a love relationship with him (Matthew 22:37). Since God has determined to love every human person in giving up his Son for each one of them, a person's response to his love must be determined by that person himself in order that genuine love exists between God and that person.

Objections to the Middle Knowledge account

Theologians following Dort have objected to the suggestion that humans have a part to play in determining their acceptance of Christ, by claiming that this would imply a human contribution to salvation which can be deemed as meritorious. It would therefore be salvation by works and there would be a basis for boasting. In response, it should be emphasized that on the 'Middle Knowledge' account which I am defending here it is the merits of Christ's atoning death that cancels the wages of sin.²⁶ Persons who choose to respond positively to God's gracious influence are merely letting the merits of Christ be applied to them. Their positive responses are (merely) a condition for receiving the merits of Christ's atoning death. This is different from salvation by works, according to which human good works are regarded as having intrinsic merits for cancelling the wages of sin. Hence, according to my view salvation is by grace alone. On my 'Middle Knowledge' account, a person who chooses to receive Christ is analogous to a destitute, paralysed and dying patient who was given help by a compassionate doctor, such that he was able to move temporarily and take a permanently curative medication costing billions of dollars for which the doctor had paid. Should the patient be willing to take the medication, their willingness would not have added to the intrinsic power of the medication to cure the disease. Rather, the medication itself is efficacious for the treatment of the disease. Furthermore, one would not suppose that after recovery the patient would boast of their act of taking the medicine; even if they were to do so, no one would be impressed. Rather, what deserves boasting is clearly the amazing compassion of the doctor.

Second, it has been objected that, if God's granting of salvation is conditioned on human response, this would subject 'the activity of Almighty God to the will of man' (Synod of Dordrecht, Article 14, VIII) and God's freedom would be limited. In response, it is important to note that divine omnipotence does not imply that God could not choose to withhold the use of his omnipotent power, quite the contrary. Furthermore, divine omnipotence should not be understood to imply the ability to bring about logically impossible states of affairs (e.g. a 'shapeless cube'),²⁷ and it is a logically impossible state of affairs that God's granting of salvation is not conditioned on human

response *given that* God chooses to allow humans the genuine ability to determine whether or not to accept his salvation. That God has chosen to withhold the use of his omnipotent power and to allow his activity to be resistible by humans is plainly testified by scriptural passages such as Acts 7:51, which speaks of Israelites resisting the activity of the Holy Spirit. And it is evident that God has chosen to allow his desires to be resistible; for example, when a person sins, they are in fact resisting the desire of God. With respect to God's freedom, it should be emphasised that on the 'Middle Knowledge' account God is still the First Cause. He is the creator of humans and the one who had determined that humans could determine whether or not they respond to him, and that without his determination humans would not have the ability to determine. Thus, the existence of humans who could resist the Holy Spirit is totally dependent on the free choice of God who is pleased to bring them into existence. Hence, God is still absolutely free and sovereign in the sense that he could have chosen not to create such humans. But he freely chose to do so. In accordance to his perfect character and his desire that humanity have a genuine love relationship with him, God will gladly give his grace in a manner that is conditional on man's response without feeling any compulsion.

Third, it might be objected that Jesus' words in Matthew 11:21 ('Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes') contradict the 'Middle Knowledge' account, for if the people at Tyre and Sidon would have repented in response to miracles, then according to the 'Middle Knowledge' account, God should indeed have performed the miracles to make them repent. The 'Middle Knowledge' account can answer this objection in two ways. Firstly, it can be argued that the author's intent in this passage is not to give a literal piece of Middle Knowledge. Rather, his intent is to point out how bad the people were. This passage should be taken as a religious hyperbole. The saying that the people in Tyre and Sidon would have repented in sackcloth and ashes can be understood as an idiom for the hard-heartedness of the people in Korazin and Bethsaida. Secondly, it can be argued that repenting in sackcloth and ashes does not necessarily indicate a real change of heart. It could indicate a merely superficial repentance, as Dordrecht's theologians would say is the case for Ahab, who

once tore his clothes, wore sackcloth and mourned when he was rebuked (1 Kings 21:27-29) but died as a 'reprobate' (1 Kings 22). Although such repentance is better than no repentance at all, yet this is still not repentance unto salvation. The situation of the people in Korazin and Bethsaida was so bad that they did not manifest any indication of repentance at all.

The apparent scriptural support for Dordrecht's account

Theologians following Dort might object that the 'Middle Knowledge' account is contradicted by other scriptural passages which have been cited in support of the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement and irresistible grace.²⁸ The passages concerning the extent of the atonement have already been discussed above and the other passages will now be addressed.

1. Total depravity

Ephesians 2:1, Romans 3:10-13: These passages affirm that all humans are dead in trespasses and sin. Proponents of the 'Middle Knowledge' account concur. They could say: 'Without gracious influence from God, humans are spiritually dead; they cannot determine to respond positively to God.' They could then point out that these passages do not exclude the notion that, after the enabling grace has been given to counter the negative influences of a person's depravity, that person can freely determine whether or not to respond to God.

2. Unconditional election

Ephesians 1:4-6, 9, 11: These verses affirm that God predestined the elect to be saved according to his own good pleasure and will. But this does not exclude the notion that God's good pleasure and will is that he would apply the extrinsically efficacious grace on those he foreknew would respond positively.

Ephesians 2:4, 5, 8-9, 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 3:4, 5: These verses affirm that the elect are not predestined to be saved because of the good works they do. But this does not exclude the notion that they are predestined to be saved because of their foreknown positive reception of God's grace and the merits of Christ's atonement.

John 15:16: This verse says that it is not the disciples who chose Christ, but Christ chose them. Proponents of the 'Middle Knowledge' account

agree that, without gracious influence from God, humans do not (and indeed are unable to) choose Christ. They argue that this verse does not exclude the notion that those whom God has chosen are those whom God foreknew would respond positively to his gracious influence.

Romans 9:13-33: This is one of the most often cited passages in support of Dort's account but the passage can also be interpreted in a manner that is consistent with the 'Middle Knowledge' account, as follows:

In verse 13, which includes a passage quoted from Malachi 1:2-3, God says that 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.' However, it should be noted that 'loved' and 'hated' in this passage may refer to God's elective purposes concerning God's covenant with Israel and the roles which the nations of Israel and Edom are to play in history, rather than to their personal salvation and eternal destiny.²⁹

Verses 15-16 should be interpreted in light of verse 11 as well as one of the central themes of Romans, which is 'salvation is not of works'. Thus, what verses 15-16 affirm is that God's determination to show mercy is not based on meritorious works or willingness to do meritorious works. But this does not exclude the possibility that those on whom God will have mercy are those whom he foreknew would respond positively to his gracious influence.

In verses 17-19, Pharaoh is cited as an example of a person whom God hardened instead of showing mercy. Again, these verses, as well as other passages which speak of divine hardening of persons, such as 1 Samuel 2:25, 2 Samuel 17:14, 1 Kings 12:11, 15, Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 11:25-27, 13:11-14 and Revelation 17:17, do not exclude the notion that those whom God hardens are those whom he foreknew would reject his gracious influence.

Nevertheless, someone might think that the notion of divine hardening excludes human response, and he might ask 'Why does God still find fault?' (verse 19).

This question is a relevant one but in the context of Romans 9 the questioner is asking it irreverently and arrogantly. (This is suggested by the fact that Romans 9:19-21 contains an allusion to Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9, where the questioner is speaking arrogantly.) Paul proceeds to answer this question from verses 20 to 32.

First, any irreverence and arrogance needs to be corrected. Thus, verse 20, 'But who are you,

O man, to talk back to God?’ and the subsequent verses (verse 21-29) are intended to make the questioner realise that he is merely a creature whereas God is the sovereign creator. The ‘what if’ in verses 20-22 suggests that the questions posed are intended to challenge the creature’s irreverence and arrogance, rather than affirming that humans are judged and punished simply because God made them this way.³⁰ The passages of Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9, which are alluded to in these verses, are basically rebuking those who scorn God’s wisdom by thinking that they are wiser than God. Therefore, what Paul is saying is that humanity should not contend with God with the attitude of thinking that they are smarter than God. The questioner should first humbly realise that God as the creator has the authority to make people just as the potter makes pottery out of clay and that he could have borne with great patience the objects of his wrath to show his wrath and power, as well as to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, viz. those who have been called from Jews and Gentiles as Hosea and Isaiah prophesied. However, the real answer to the question, as indicated by the phrase ‘What shall we say then?’ (verse 30), is that, unlike the Gentiles who have obtained righteousness by faith, certain Israelites did not attain righteousness because they pursued it not by faith but as though it were by works. This is consistent with the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account that election is conditioned by a person’s determination to respond in faith.

3. Irresistible grace

- John 6:37: This verse says that all those whom the Father gives to Jesus will come to Jesus. This does not exclude the notion that those whom the Father gives to Jesus are in fact those who would respond positively to God’s gracious influence.
- John 6:44: This verse says that no one can come to Christ unless God draws him. This does not imply that a person cannot resist God when God draws him.
- Romans 8:14,30: These verses say that those whom God predestined he calls, but again this does not exclude the possibility that those whom God predestined are indeed those who would respond positively to his gracious influence.
- Ezekiel 36:26: This verse says that God will change the Israelites’ heart of stone to a heart of flesh. It does not say that a person cannot resist

this change. Compare Ezekiel 18:31, where God exhorts the people to get a new heart.

- Philippians 2:13: This verse says it is God who works in the Philippians to will and act according to his good pleasure, but it does not say that God is the sufficient cause of their will and act, nor does it say that they cannot resist God’s work (in the same way that the Jews are said to resist the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts 7:51).

Conclusion

It has been shown here that the Synod of Dordrecht’s account is inconsistent with the love of God as manifested by the unlimited extent of the atonement, a doctrine which is affirmed by the Scriptures. By contrast, the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account is consistent not only with the love of God but also with what the Scriptures say concerning human depravity, the atonement, divine sovereignty, divine omnipotence, divine freedom, election and grace. Therefore, on scriptural and theological grounds, the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account should be preferred to Dort’s.

Now I do not wish to argue that a Christian must hold a ‘Middle Knowledge’ account, for there might well be other (non-Dordrecht) accounts which are also consistent with the Scriptures and which do not have the problems that beset the account of Dort. What I do hope to have shown in this article is that the theological system of Dort can justifiably be rejected by Christians who hold to the authority of Scriptures. This conclusion is not without pastoral significance, for Dort’s scripturally unjustified monergistic account of predestination has troubled the conscience of many lay Christians and caused people to stumble – and surely no Christian would want to be a person through whom the stumbling block comes (Matthew 18:6-9). Consider, for example, the testimony of philosopher Edwin Curley given in a debate on Christian theism (note that in the context of the debate the ‘pre-destination’ he refers to is a monergistic account of predestination, which is different from a ‘Middle Knowledge’ account of predestination as explained above):³¹

The usual label for someone who once embraced Christianity and then rejected it is ‘heretic’. I have no objection to that label....What started me on this path was reading the prayer book my mother gave me when I was 16. At the back were printed the Articles of Religion members

of my church, the Episcopal Church, were expected to accept. ... I was disturbed that my church accepted pre-destination. Before the foundation of the world, the Articles said, God had chosen some vessels for honour and others for dishonour. ... nothing happens except by his will. So, if I end up in Hell, he will have known that from eternity, and he will have willed it from eternity. Pre-destination is not so widely accepted now as it was when my church was founded in the 16th century. I find many Christians who reject it. And I sympathize with them. Their hearts are in the right place, certainly. I cannot believe that a just and loving God would create beings he knew and had pre-determined would spend eternity in hell. But Christians can reject pre-destination only at the cost of ignoring the authority of their scriptures and the implications of their theology.

How sad it must be for Curley's mother to know that a misunderstanding of the doctrine of predestination found in a prayer book she gave her son led to his rejection of Christianity.

It is my prayer that such tragic misunderstandings can be removed by the clarification of the doctrine presented in this article and that this would lead many to a better comprehension of the infinite love of God.³²

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Notes

- 1 See for example the essays in Ken Perszyk (ed.), *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 2 'Dort, Synod of', in E.A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 3 See Carl Trueman, 'Calvin and Calvinism' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 4 That is, apart from Adam and Eve, and Jesus. This qualification applies for the rest of the article.
- 5 The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, Article 3.
- 6 One might hold the position that this irresistible grace would eventually be given to all, resulting in the salvation of every individual. This 'Christian Universalist' position is not the view of Dort's theologians nor of Calvin, who writes that 'salvation is spontaneously offered to some, while others have

no access to it' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3 Chapter 21). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this Universalist position further, except to note that it is inconsistent with the Scriptures; see Stephen T. Davis, 'Universalism, Hell and The Fate of The Ignorant', *Modern Theology* 6 (1990) 173-186.

- 7 The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, Article 14.
- 8 The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, Rejection of the Errors VII, VIII, IX.
- 9 The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, Article 10.
- 10 See Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, chapter 2.
- 11 This does not imply that the planet on which humans are living would be at the centre of the solar system or of the universe, neither does it exclude the possibility of aliens.
- 12 Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word Books, 1983) 240.
- 13 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 851.
- 14 It has been suggested (e.g. by Jonathan Edwards) that God desires the manifestation of his attributes, including the manifestation of his wrath on those who perish, in order that he is seen to be just, and that 'the saints will be made more sensible how great their salvation is'; see Jonathan Edwards, Sermon XI, 'The Eternity of Hell Torments', in Edward Hickman (ed.), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988) 87. In response, the manifestation of his wrath and justice had already been accomplished through the suffering of Christ on the cross for the sins of humanity and a reflection of the incomprehensible depths of his suffering would be enough to make the saints sufficiently sensible as to how great their salvation is. For more on this line of rebuttal to Edwards, see Oliver Crisp, 'Augustinian Universalism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53 (2003) 127-145.
- 15 'Molina, Luis de', in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 16 See for example William Lane Craig, 'A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?' in Clark Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany Publishers, 1989).
- 17 Luis de Molina and Alfred J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) Qu.14, Art.13, Disp.52, No.9.
- 18 William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) chapter 28.
- 19 Molina and Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, Qu.14, Art.13, Disp.53, Part 2, No.29.
- 20 Molina and Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge*,

- Qu.14, Art.13, Disp.53, Part 2, No.30.
- 21 William Lane Craig, 'No Other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ' in Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (eds), *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 46-47. Note that in this article 'fore-knew' refers to God's knowledge of future counterfactuals. Such an understanding is consistent with the biblical definition of 'foreknowledge' as used in verses such as 1 Peter 1:2 and Romans 8:29, which some have argued is a stronger notion that encompasses not only knowledge of future counterfactuals but also 'a self-determining on God's part to this fellowship'; see Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895) 161. It should be noted that this stronger notion does not exclude the 'Middle Knowledge' account that those whom God had a prior determination to enter into relationship with are those whom God knows would determine to respond positively to his gracious influence.
 - 22 Martin Luther, 'The Bondage of the Will', trans. P.S. Watson, in *Luther's Works, vol.33: Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 37-38.
 - 23 Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations*, 518-521.
 - 24 Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* 5th edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 222-227.
 - 25 Concerning the question how God could have known future counterfactuals, the 'Middle Knowledge' account defended here would affirm that this Middle Knowledge is conceptual rather than perceptual in nature. That is, as an omniscient being God essentially has the property of knowing all true propositions including counterfactuals, similar to the mind's knowledge of innate ideas, without having to 'see' them; cf. Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations*, 521.
 - 26 The concept of 'wages of sin' can be found in scriptural passages such as Romans 6:23 and is consistent with Calvin's penal substitution theory of atonement which Dort's theologians hold.
 - 27 See Andrew Loke, 'Divine omnipotence and moral perfection', *Religious Studies* 46 (2010) 526.
 - 28 The Middle Knowledge account defended here does not take issue with the 'perseverance of the saints'. For an example of how a Molinist defends this doctrine, see William Lane Craig, "Lest Anyone Should Fall": A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991) 65-74.
 - 29 Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005) 142-143.
 - 30 Some might object by claiming that passages such as Proverbs 16:4 affirm that the wicked are made for the day of evil. In response we can say that Hebrew writers often omit mentioning secondary agents in God's plan. For example, in 2 Samuel 24:1 it is mentioned that God incites David to take the census, but 1 Chronicles 21:1 says that it is Satan who incites David to take the census. Apparently God allows Satan to incite David to take the census in his plan. Proverbs 16:4 therefore does not exclude the possibility that the wicked person is the secondary agent who determines their wickedness. In other words, this verse is not necessary affirming that the wicked are created by the LORD to be so. What it is affirming is that God will ensure that the wicked are punished.
 - 31 For the full quotation and its context, see www.reasonablefaith.org/the-existence-of-the-christian-god-the-craig-curley-debate.
 - 32 I would like to thank Professors Paul Copan and William Lane Craig for introducing me to Molinism, as well as Professor Robert Saucy and Dr Robert Price from Biola University, Rev Dr Jeffrey Khoo, Mary Lim and an anonymous referee for this journal for very helpful comments on the earlier drafts of this article.