

# JOHN DAVENANT'S *DISSERTATION ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST: A REVIEW ESSAY* (WITH AN INVITATION)<sup>1</sup>

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

John Davenant (1572–1641), one-time Bishop of Salisbury and British delegate to the synod of Dort, wrote a Latin dissertation on the extent of the atonement that was published posthumously in 1650 and translated into English over a century later.<sup>3</sup> Early reception was mixed,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This review essay is presented with deep gratitude to my dad, Bruce Compton, and to Drs. Combs & McCabe, whose lively debate about this and other topics encouraged a generation of students to diligently search the scriptures (and, perhaps, to also steer clear of certain conclusions in our research papers!).

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<sup>3</sup>See John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians...* (trans. Josiah Allport; 2 vols.; London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1831–1832); full title: *A Dissertation on the Death of Christ as to Its Extent and Special Benefits: containing a short history of Pelagianism and shewing the agreement of the doctrines of the Church of England on general redemption, election, and predestination, with the primitive fathers of the Christian church, and above all, with the Holy Scriptures*. The dissertation has been republished separately (Quinta Press), but, at this point, the Allport ed. remains the more accessible. For other biographical material, see Josiah Allport, *Life of Bishop Davenant*, prefatory to Davenant, *Exposition*, 1:ix–lii; also Alan C. Clifford's "Introduction" to the Quinta reprint, esp. 2–3 (page numbers from pre-published ed.).

<sup>4</sup>John Owen (1616–1683), e.g., whose treatise on the same topic appeared two years previously to Davenant's, thought that the "foundations" of the latter's work were "neither founded in, nor...on the word...[and were] mutually conflicting and destructive of each other" (*Works*, x. 433, quoted in J. I. Packer's "Introductory Essay" and "Analysis" [hereafter "Introduction"], in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* [repr. of 1852 ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007], 23, n. 5. This essay can also be found under the title "'Saved by His Precious Blood': An Introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*," in Packer's *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1990], 125–48, 344–46 and under the same title, in Packer and Mark Dever's, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2007], 111–44). Richard Baxter (1615–1691) viewed it quite differently. Baxter, in fact, delayed publishing his own manuscript on the topic after encountering Davenant's work. "What need more than Davenant's Dissertation & Daillé's *Apology*?" (Baxter, *Letter* 314; cf. also 115, n. 1; 263 n.; 140, n. 4; 77, n. 3, cited in Clifford, "Introduction," 9). Daillé, as Clifford notes, was known as the "French Baxter" and, at one time, studied under Amyraut at Saumur). A similar regard (at least for Davenant's position) was expressed by Edmund Calamy (1600–1660) in his opinion on the atonement registered in the minutes of the Westminster Assembly:

predictably falling along party lines. In fact something quite similar can be seen presently (when Davenant's piece is not simply overlooked)<sup>5</sup> in debates over Calvin's and Dort's legacies.<sup>6</sup>

Here, however, I am not interested in tracing the reception history of Davenant's views, much less in showing how they relate to Calvin's. My task is at once both more modest and, I want to suggest, more urgent. I want to present Davenant's argument for careful consideration based on the conviction that he should continue to serve as an important conversation partner in the debate over the extent of the atonement. And, if he is going to play this role, if he *should* play this role, then his work needs to be better known and understood.<sup>7</sup>

To this end, therefore, I will first give an aerial sketch of Davenant's argument in the form of a detailed (and annotated) outline—something akin to what one finds in J. I. Packer's introduction to Owen's *Death of Death*. Then I will summarize the arguments Davenant enlists in support of his thesis. And, finally, I will conclude with three, somewhat critical reflections on Davenant's piece. After all, simply because Davenant's argument is important and should be considered does not imply that it is definitive or, for that matter, unassailable.

### ***A DISSERTATION ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST OUTLINED***

The Banner of Truth edition of John Owen's *Death of Death*

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I am far from universal redemption in the Arminian sense; but that that I hold is in the sense of our divines (e.g. Bishop Davenant) in the Synod of Dort, that Christ did pay a price for all...that Jesus Christ did not only die sufficiently for all, but God did intend, in giving Christ, and Christ in giving himself, did intend to put all men in a state of salvation in case they do believe (cited in Clifford, "Introduction," 10; cf. Calamy's grandson's similar sentiments in Allport, *Life*, 1:50, and Ryle's in Clifford, "Introduction," 10).

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Andrew David Naselli and Mark Snoeberger, eds., *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: 3 Views* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), where Davenant makes only a passing appearance (207), insufficient to even make the name index (cf., e.g., the multiple entries for John Owen).

<sup>6</sup>On the former, cf., e.g., Roger Nicole, "Moysse Amyraut and the Controversy on Universal Grace: First Phase" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1966), 21–29; Mark Shand, "The English Delegation to the Synod of Dort," *British Reformed Journal* 28 (October–December 1999): 37–39; and Lee Gatiss, "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 143–63. On the latter, cf., e.g., Clifford's "Introduction"; also idem, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640–1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); et al; along with P. L. Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement: About Sufficiency, Efficiency, and Anachronism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (Fall 2008): 317–35; and Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), esp. 126–60.

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., G. Michael Thomas's similar sentiment (*The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma from Reformed Theology from Calvin to Consensus* [Studies in Christian History and Thought; London: Paternoster, 1997], 150).

contains a useful introduction to Owen's argument by J. I. Packer.<sup>8</sup> Besides the context and summaries Packer provides (given in English more readily accessible than Owen's), he also gives readers a roadmap to Owen's argument, something Packer hopes will help readers "keep [their] bearings."<sup>9</sup> No similar analysis exists to help readers keep their bearings in the equally complex argument which is Davenant's *Dissertation*.<sup>10</sup> So, before exploring Davenant's work, we would do well to get a bird's eye view of its shape.<sup>11</sup>

1. Putting the Controversy in Perspective: The Historic *Via Media*<sup>12</sup>
  - 1.1 The controversy is at times more semantic than substantive.<sup>13</sup>
  - 1.2 The controversialists are at odds with the historic *via media*: *Sufficient for all, efficient for the elect*.<sup>14</sup>
2. Sufficient for all: Proposition 1<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See "Introduction," 26–31.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g., Allport's half-page outline (*Exposition*, 2:589). Clifford, e.g., in a recent introduction to a reprinting of Davenant's dissertation simply reflects on Davenant's place within the Calvin v. Calvinist discussion and makes no similar effort to make Davenant's work more accessible. See, though, the useful discussion of Davenant's views in Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 187–213.

<sup>11</sup>In addition to the following outline, the reader may also find it helpful to consult a few places where Davenant briefly summarizes his argument. Chief among these are 511–12 and 556–58.

<sup>12</sup>317–39 (ch. 1).

<sup>13</sup>318.

<sup>14</sup>319–39. This point alone seems to put the lie to the claim that Davenant's position was novel (see, e.g., Thomas's reference to Godfrey's claim [*The Extent of the Atonement*, 150–52]). In fact, throughout, Davenant seeks to put his argument in historical perspective. In several places, he includes extended catalogues of patristic, medieval and reformed authors whose opinions mirror his own (see, e.g., 432–33; 468–72; 489–90, 494–95; 537–50; et al.). This includes specific conclusions he draws exegetically.

Despite the general thrust of his argument, Rouwendal's admission that "no sharp line can be drawn between the classical position and hypothetical universalism, neither in substance nor in history" further points in this direction ("Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position," 322, n. 22). Moreover, among other questionable matters, the taxonomy Rouwendal establishes seems somewhat artificial: E.g., (1) it is simply not the case that John Owen would deny that Christ died sufficiently for all men (cf. *Death of Death*, 184 with the category "Particular" in the chart on "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position," 323) or that "Christ die[d] in any sense for all men" ("Christ hath purchased for many [the "common gifts of light and knowledge"] for whom he did not make his soul a ransom" (*Death of Death*, 250; cf. also 251; also on 202, Owen speaks of the atonement "accomplish[ing]...other ends," namely "conviction, restraint, [and] hardening") and (2) Davenant nowhere talks about two types of election or denies that "predestination ha[s] anything to do with Christ's death," as Rouwendal claims ("Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position," 323).

<sup>15</sup>340–400 (chaps. 2–3).

- 2.1 Proposition 1 stated: *The atonement extends beyond the elect.*<sup>16</sup>
- 2.2 Proposition 1 explained<sup>17</sup>
- 2.3 Proposition 1 proven (14 points)<sup>18</sup>
  - 2.3.1 Scriptural arguments (6 points)
  - 2.3.2 Other arguments (8 points)<sup>19</sup>
- 2.4 Proposition 1 defended (17 points)<sup>20</sup>
- 3. Sufficient for all: Proposition 2<sup>21</sup>
  - 3.1 Proposition 2 stated: *The atonement has an ordained, universal sufficiency based on the evangelical covenant.*<sup>22</sup>
  - 3.2 Proposition 2 explained (3 points)<sup>23</sup>
  - 3.3 Proposition 2 proven (3 points)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>340–41.

<sup>17</sup>Davenant here insists that the extent of the atonement is not entirely comprehensive. Some are excluded from the atonement's purview—from its *applicability*, including “apostate angels” and those who exclude themselves through unbelief (342–43). Whether elect angels are also excluded, Davenant does not here say. Later Davenant says that “the most learned Divines” do admit that whatever grace the elect angels merit is grace “communicate[d] by Christ's death” (414). As such, the only thing that prevents Christ's death from being sufficient for the non-elect angels is “the will of God alone,” not to the “insufficiency of” Christ's death (414). See also 381.

Davenant's juxtaposition of apostate angels and the finally unbelieving and impenitent is slightly confusing, since the former are excluded from the atonement's applicability based *both* on their confirmed unbelief and by the fact that they are angels (or, at the least, apostate angels), not men. That the latter are not doubly-excluded is clear from Davenant's insistence that “non-application...arises not from the limitation of the remedy, but because the only mode of application appointed by God is obstinately rejected” (343). This is confirmed later when he says the following: “We do not deny therefore what is evident, namely, that the difference [*sic*] between devils and men consists in this, that from the ordination of God, the death of Christ is a thing ordained for and applicable to mankind; but neither ordained for, nor applicable to devils” (368).

Similar ambiguities arise later when Davenant asserts that the texts supporting the universal nature of Christ's remedy do not underwrite the Remonstrants' conclusion “that by this death of Christ reconciliation and remission of sins were acquired or obtained for each and every man” (351). In this latter case, however, Davenant once more makes his point clear when he adds that these texts “prove in a manner sufficiently strong what we intend, That this death of Christ was appointed and ordained by God and Christ for an universal cause of salvation, or an universal remedy for all men, applicable *to the obtaining of reconciliation and remission*” (351, emphasis mine).

<sup>18</sup>343–65.

<sup>19</sup>Davenant might wish the labels here (and elsewhere) were not *Scriptural* and *other*, but, perhaps, *explicitly* Scriptural and *implicitly* Scriptural.

<sup>20</sup>366–400 (ch. 3).

<sup>21</sup>401–39 (ch. 4).

<sup>22</sup>401–2.

<sup>23</sup>401–7.

- 3.3.1 The atonement has an *ordained* universal sufficiency.
- 3.3.2 The atonement's ordained universal sufficiency is based on the *evangelical covenant*.
- 3.3.3 The evangelical covenant is (partially) based on the *universal ability* (or, *possibility*) to exercise faith.
  - 3.3.3.1 The possibility of faith defended (2 points).<sup>25</sup>
- 4. Sufficient for all: Proposition 3<sup>26</sup>
  - 4.1 Proposition 3 stated: *All are reconcilable* [part 1]; *however, none is reconciled without faith* [part 2].<sup>27</sup>
  - 4.2 Proposition 3 prefaced<sup>28</sup>
  - 4.3 Proposition 3, part 1 proven<sup>29</sup>
  - 4.4 Proposition 3, part 2 explained and proven<sup>30</sup>
    - 4.4.1 explained (3 points)<sup>31</sup>
    - 4.4.2 proven (8 points)<sup>32</sup>
      - 4.4.2.1 Scriptural arguments (4 points)<sup>33</sup>
      - 4.4.2.2 Other arguments (4 points)<sup>34</sup>
  - 4.5 Proposition 3 defended (7 points)<sup>35</sup>
    - 4.5.1 Against the eternal justification of all men (3 points)<sup>36</sup>
    - 4.5.2 Against the eternal justification of the elect (4 points)<sup>37</sup>
- 5. Sufficient for all: Proposition 4<sup>38</sup>
  - 5.1 Proposition 4 stated: *The divine, not human, will restricts the suc-*

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<sup>24</sup>407–39.

<sup>25</sup>435–37.

<sup>26</sup>440–72 (ch. 5).

<sup>27</sup>440–41.

<sup>28</sup>441–42.

<sup>29</sup>442–46.

<sup>30</sup>446–58.

<sup>31</sup>446–47.

<sup>32</sup>447–58.

<sup>33</sup>447–51.

<sup>34</sup>451–58.

<sup>35</sup>458–72.

<sup>36</sup>459–63.

<sup>37</sup>463–72.

<sup>38</sup>473–512 (ch. 6).

*cess of the evangelical covenant.*<sup>39</sup>

5.2 Proposition 4 prefaced<sup>40</sup>

5.3 Proposition 4 proven and defended (8 + 3 points)<sup>41</sup>

5.3.3.1 Argument 3 defended (3 points)<sup>42</sup>

6. Efficient for the elect: Proposition 5<sup>43</sup>

6.1 Proposition 5 stated: *God and Christ intended that Christ would die especially for the elect.*<sup>44</sup>

6.2 Proposition 5 prefaced<sup>45</sup>

6.3 Proposition 5 proven and defended (16 + 1 points)<sup>46</sup>

6.3.1 Scripture arguments (4 + 1 points)<sup>47</sup>

6.3.1.4 Argument 4 defended (1 point)<sup>48</sup>

6.3.2 Other arguments (12 points)<sup>49</sup>

6.4 Proposition 5 defended (4 points)<sup>50</sup>

### ***A DISSERTATION ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST SUMMARIZED***

As the outline shows, Davenant organizes his argument according to the two-fold thesis that Christ's death is sufficient for all and efficient—*savingly* efficient—for the elect alone. Davenant's argument for the atonement's universal sufficiency can be summarized along four lines and his argument for the atonement's special efficacy can be summarized along two. After summarizing these arguments, we will also note the handful of ways Davenant attempts to explain his thesis. That is, it is one thing for Davenant to prove that Christ's death has a universal sufficiency and a special efficacy, it is another for him to offer reasons why God designed the atonement this way.

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<sup>39</sup>475.

<sup>40</sup>475–78.

<sup>41</sup>479–511.

<sup>42</sup>483–87.

<sup>43</sup>513–58 (ch. 7).

<sup>44</sup>516. It is interesting that Davenant makes no appeal to 1 Tim 4:10, which seems to be the earliest basis for the historical phrase "sufficient for all and efficient for some."

<sup>45</sup>513–17.

<sup>46</sup>517–50.

<sup>47</sup>517–25.

<sup>48</sup>524–25.

<sup>49</sup>525–50.

<sup>50</sup>550–56.

### The Intended, Universal Sufficiency of Christ's Death: Four Arguments

Davenant's argument for the intended, universal sufficiency of Christ's death can be summarized along four lines.<sup>51</sup>

First, Davenant observes that Scripture speaks of the non-elect experiencing benefits purchased or merited by Christ's death.<sup>52</sup> That is, if indeed the non-elect receive supernatural benefits<sup>53</sup> and if these benefits are based on Christ's death,<sup>54</sup> then it follows that, in some sense, Christ died *for* the non-elect.<sup>55</sup>

Second, Davenant insists, the very offer of the gospel demands that that which is offered (i.e., salvation) be in some sense intended for the one to whom it is offered.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Davenant maintains throughout that the "divine promises"<sup>57</sup> reveal the divine will or, as he calls it, the "evangelical covenant."<sup>58</sup> After all, "A promise has no power of alluring

<sup>51</sup>Although Davenant is reluctant to use a particular decretal order to support his own position (e.g., he says in one place, "It seems to me a slippery and very dangerous thing to contend about these imaginary signs of our reason, as to undertake to establish and to refute from them questions of faith" [515]), this reluctance does not prevent him from asserting his position (515) or, for that matter, arguing from a certain position in other places (see, e.g., 362–63). On Davenant's decretal view, see Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 188, n. 74.

<sup>52</sup>352–54.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. John 6:68; Acts 5:20; Titus 2:11; Luke 24:46–47; 2 Cor 4:7; Rom 10:15; Matt 21:43; Luke 10:11; 2 Thess 1:8; Heb 6 (352).

<sup>54</sup>John 1:16; Eph 6:7 (353). Davenant supports this conclusion by adducing the following axiom: "Whatever supernatural grace is given through Christ to any man, is given from the merit of Christ: for Christ does not confer any thing upon men which he hath not first merited for them by his obedience" (353), a conclusion finding support in Ambrose's comments on Eph. 1: "Every gift of the grace of God is in Christ" (cited on 353).

<sup>55</sup>This conclusion, Davenant adds, is further supported by the fact that, per the "ancients" (i.e., Prosper, the African fathers, and the council of Valence), Christ's death is applied to all baptized infants, elect and non-elect, for the remission of original sin (353–54).

<sup>56</sup>See, e.g., 357–62; 401–407; 417–29; 429–39; 441–42; 442–46; 446. See also Moore's summary, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 198–208.

<sup>57</sup>362; cf. Rom 3:21–26; Mark 16:15; Gal 3 (404–405, 419).

<sup>58</sup>See, e.g., 404–405. Unless one recognizes this universal intention to save, Davenant insists that one cannot be in material agreement with the historic formula, i.e., *sufficient* for all (see 317–39; 407–17; he makes a similar case for "efficient for all," see 519–22). Davenant calls this the atonement's *ordained*—not simply *mere*—sufficiency (cf. 402–404). To put it another way, one simply cannot claim that Christ's death is sufficient for all while simultaneously maintaining that Christ was "unwilling to die or be offered up for many" (378).

Davenant supports his point by noting that were Christ's death defined as merely sufficient, then it would be impossible to say that Christ's death is sufficient for all men and not sufficient for angels, which all want to maintain (411–13; cf. Ambrose and Ames). Even if one were to suggest that the distinction still would be possible since Christ died *as a man* and not *as an angel*, Davenant suggests that no guilt is so great that "the blood-shedding of God could not suffice for its expiation, which is of infinite value

others to any action than those for whom it is presupposed to have been made.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, for example, God’s promise of forgiveness to Cain presupposes “that a cause of salvation was procured and applicable to” him.<sup>60</sup> Much the same could be said for Jesus’s designation as “universal Saviour and Redeemer”<sup>61</sup> or the response (i.e., obedient faith and gratitude) demanded from all those who hear the gospel.<sup>62</sup> To be sure, this intended benefit does not suggest that all for whom Christ died are saved; rather, Scripture—to say nothing of the fathers<sup>63</sup>—consistently distinguishes between those for whom Christ died and those who are saved.<sup>64</sup> All that is necessary, therefore, for the truth of the gospel’s promises is that Christ’s death must allow, in a way not otherwise possible, for God to justly pardon anyone he wishes to pardon<sup>65</sup> and for anyone desiring pardon to claim it for himself.<sup>66</sup>

Davenant goes on to insist that this “desire [for] pardon” is universally possible to all with whom the evangelical covenant has been made. The possibility is based in the human capacity to receive supernatural

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from the dignity of the Divine person” (413). Further, Davenant argues that the very logic of the “twofold distinction” presupposes that the sufficiency acknowledged is an ordained sufficiency. Why, e.g., speak of effectual application “if Christ had no intention at all of offering himself up except for the predestined alone” (409)?

Davenant notes that some, of course, who do restrict Christ’s death to the elect also deny that it was sufficient for all (e.g., Piscator).

<sup>59</sup>419

<sup>60</sup>Gen. 4:7 (362)

<sup>61</sup>Cf. John 4:42; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 John 2:2 (on this text, see the citations of Prosper and Musculus, 361).

<sup>62</sup>Cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 14:9. In fact, as Davenant says at one point,

Unless the death of Christ be understood as a remedy applicable to all, the foundation on which ministers of the Gospel build exhortations [i.e., to obedience and gratitude], will be always uncertain, and often false: Always uncertain, because it cannot be known by men who are the elect. Often false, as often indeed as it is exhibited to the non-elect, who by this kind of redemption are not bound to live to Christ, unless it be presupposed that the sacrifice offered by Christ for the redemption of the world was for them (359; cf. also 419–21).

Similarly,

Faith is not previously required in mankind, as a condition, which makes Christ to have died for them, but which makes the death of Christ, which is applicable to all from the Divine loving-kindness to man, actually applied and beneficial to individuals.... When...we announce to any one, that the death of Christ would profit him if he believed, we presume that it was destined for him, as applicable before he believed (358–59).

<sup>63</sup>E.g., Ambrose, Prosper, Theophylact (424–25).

<sup>64</sup>See esp. John 3:17–18; 5:40; Acts 13:46; Heb 4:1 (424).

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Gen 4:7; Ezek 18:21. Davenant later insists that only if God was in some sense already reconciled to all men (something he refers to as God’s *placability* or *reconcilability*) would God “actually [be] pacified and reconciled to any man, as soon as he should believe” (443; cf. also 441–46).

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Rom 10:8–9, 11 (426–28).

aid (which is necessary for exercising faith)<sup>67</sup> and the fact that God has not ordained, through his ordinary (not absolute) power,<sup>68</sup> that some people *cannot* exercise faith.<sup>69</sup> It is also based on the fact that God is, in one sense, able to do that which he has not willed. While he will not, per his ordained power, this does not suggest that he cannot, per his absolute power. Moreover, it is God's absolute power that is set out for contemplation and proclamation in Scripture and, in particular, the gospel. As such, Davenant argues,

We are not to judge the power of God from his secret decrees: for he did not decree of stones to raise up children to Abraham [Matt. 3:9], nor to deliver Christ from the hands of the Jews [Matt. 26:53; Mark 14:36], nor to raise up and make to stand every fallen man [Rom. 14:4], nor to shed the abundance of his grace on every one [2 Cor. 9:8], which nevertheless (if we are willing to attend to the holy Scriptures), are not on that account to be esteemed impossible.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, while some never exercise this power, this in itself does not vitiate its existence. After all, some do exercise it. Granted, those who do are numbered among the elect; however, this says less about the extent of the capacity than it does about God's secret will and human depravity.<sup>71</sup>

Third, Davenant argues that while Christ's death could be applied before it was accomplished (in time), it cannot be effectual before it is applied (by faith). Thus, when some insisted that Christ's death does not extend beyond the elect because some were already in hell when Christ died,<sup>72</sup> Davenant responds noting that Christ was "a Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."<sup>73</sup> That is, "The efficacy of this propitiatory sacrifice," he says in one place, "could extend itself as much to those who lived before Christ suffered, as to us who live after his passion."<sup>74</sup> Or, again, "the eternal virtue of the death of Christ...bring[s]

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<sup>67</sup>429–30; cf. also 407. Here Davenant is appealing to Aquinas's distinction between two kinds of abilities: (1) an ability arising from in oneself and (2) an ability owing to an external force (429).

<sup>68</sup>By *ordinary* power, Davenant means that which is "possible to be done...or not done...according to the common course of natural or moral things" (431, quoting Bannes). It is distinct from God's *absolute* power, which concerns God's ability to do anything "that does not involve a contradiction if it should be done" (430). This distinction owes to Aquinas (430).

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Ezek 33:11; Rom 11:23; Rev 2:21; Ezek 28:21–22; also 2 Tim 2:25–26; 2 Pet 3:9 (431–34).

<sup>70</sup>437.

<sup>71</sup>435. Among other arguments, Davenant suggests that God, e.g., would have had the power to create the world had he not chosen to do so (435).

<sup>72</sup>Cf. the statements of the Leyden fathers (367).

<sup>73</sup>See 368; 483; see also 553–54.

<sup>74</sup>368.

salvation to mankind in every age.”<sup>75</sup>

While certain others insist that the elect<sup>76</sup> or, in some cases, all men<sup>77</sup> were eternally/automatically justified or the non-elect’s sins doubly punished,<sup>78</sup> Davenant responds by emphasizing that the saving benefits of Christ’s death are suspended upon repentant faith.<sup>79</sup> In fact, until such a response, God’s wrath remains.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, suspending the effects on faith is neither unjust to Christ nor to the non-elect. It is no injustice to Christ, because he has not willed his merits be applied in any other way. It is no injustice to the non-elect, because no man is anywhere promised a right to Christ’s benefits apart from faith.<sup>81</sup>

In short, while Christ was indeed the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, there is a difference, Davenant says, between what God has willed and that will’s manifestation externally.<sup>82</sup> Thus, in the case of the elect, while God has indeed loved them from eternity, this does not mean that “he is actually reconciled to them from eternity.”<sup>83</sup> Or, to put it another way, God’s love no more makes the one loved reconciled than does God’s “eternal will [to] creat[e] the world” mean “that the world was created from eternity.”<sup>84</sup>

Fourth, Davenant argues that while some passages clearly assert that

<sup>75</sup>368.

<sup>76</sup>See 447–51; 451–58; 463–72.

<sup>77</sup>See 447–51; 451–58; 459–63.

<sup>78</sup>See 374–77. Some insisted that Christ’s death could only be a sufficient cause of salvation if “nothing else is required to produce the effect” (460; cf. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 206–207).

<sup>79</sup>Cf. Ezek 28:21; Luke 24:46–47; 1 John 1:9; Acts 16:31; John 6:40; 20:31; Rom 3:22, 25; Gal 2:16; also John 1:12–13.

<sup>80</sup>Cf. Mark 16:16; John 3:36; 8:24; Eph 2:3; cf. also Eph 2:11–13; Rom 5:1 and 1:4; 1 Tim 1:16 (447–51). To this Davenant adds one more observation: “[S]ince the merit of Christ in the acceptance of God has infinite and eternal efficacy, this inconvenience also would follow, That the sins of men were pardoned before they were committed, were expiated before they were perpetrated, if the remission of sins and actual reconciliation of men arose solely from the merit of Christ, without any intermediate act of ours” (452–53).

One may wonder, however, about the post-conversion sins of believers, especially in light of his later statement that “there is no pardon of sins but of those which are committed” (453).

<sup>81</sup>Cf. John 3:36; 460–61. Davenant says there is no injustice done because the same person is not making the same payment twice (Christ vis-à-vis non-elect [375–76]). See also his illustration on 376–77.

<sup>82</sup>Cf. 466; 468–72. This distinction also preserves God’s immutability. That is, that God can be full of wrath toward the elect at one moment and at peace in another does not deny God’s immutability, since he has from eternity planned to act in this way toward the elect. Rather, it simply means that God has planned to act in different ways to certain persons depending on their status (unbelief v. belief [463–66]).

<sup>83</sup>466.

<sup>84</sup>466.

Christ died for some,<sup>85</sup> none denies that he died for (the) others.<sup>86</sup> Conversely, while “none occur in which it is denied that he died for any persons, many occur in which it is asserted that he died for all.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, we should “acknowledge with grateful minds the sum of [God’s] revealed Gospel...that one died for all, that whosoever should believe in him may have eternal life.”<sup>88</sup>

### **The Intended, Special Efficacy of Christ’s Death: Two Arguments**

Davenant’s argument for the other half of his two-fold thesis—that there was an intended, special efficacy to Christ’s death—can be summarized along two lines.

First, Christ intentionally ratified the new covenant with his death.<sup>89</sup> This new or “secret covenant,” Davenant maintains, is distinguished from the universal, evangelical covenant and embraces only the “spiritual Israel” or “the elect children of God.”<sup>90</sup>

Second, if the efficiency of Christ’s death is predicated upon the divine, not human, will<sup>91</sup> and if it is implausible (“incredible”) to think that Christ gave his life without regard to his father’s will,<sup>92</sup> then it follows that Christ died in a special way or with special regard for the elect (i.e., those whom the father willed to save).<sup>93</sup> Moreover, if none are

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Matt 1:21; John 10:15; 11:5, et al.

<sup>86</sup>See 398–99.

<sup>87</sup>399.

<sup>88</sup>400.

<sup>89</sup>See 525–26; cf. Jer 31:33; Heb 8:6, 10.

<sup>90</sup>525.

<sup>91</sup>Cf. John 6:37; 17:2; Eph 1:4–7; see 517–18 (536–50). Davenant puts it this way elsewhere: “[F]aith and good will” are either the result of grace and, thus, a result of Christ’s death or entirely dependent on the will of man (528). Davenant rejects the latter for a number of reasons, among which is that God would not sacrifice something as precious as his Son’s life to obtain something finally contingent on the will of man. “The blood of Christ,” he avers, “could not flow in vain” (526–27).

<sup>92</sup>Cf. John 17:9, 12, 19; Heb 2:13 (519; 530–31).

<sup>93</sup>Cf. John 10:15; 11:51–52; Eph 5:25–26; Titus 2:14; Acts 20:28; Eph 1:22–23; 5:23; John 20:28; 17:24 (see 519–22). This is underscored by Christ’s special intercession for some (531): “As Christ specially prayed for special benefits to be conferred on the elect [John 17], so he specially offered up himself in order to merit the same benefits” (531; cf. Suarez, 531–32). Therefore, “Whatever Christ obtains for individual persons by his special intercession, that he merited for them with the Father by the offering of himself which pertains to them especially: But by his intercession he obtains for the elect faith, perseverance, and salvation itself: Therefore he specially offered himself for them, that he might infallibly procure for them these benefits” (532). In this regard, Moore (*English Hypothetical Universalism*, 196–97) is right when he says that Davenant believed that it was “not the effect of propitiation itself that brings about faith in the elect,” even while one or two of Davenant’s statements appear to point in a slightly different direction (see, e.g., his remark that “Christ by his death

saved without Christ's assistance<sup>94</sup> and if any such assistance is based on the merit of Christ's death and never without regard to Christ's will to bestow such assistance through his death, then whoever is saved is saved because Christ intended to save such a one through his death. To put it otherwise, since not all are saved and since God's antecedent work is requisite in those that are,<sup>95</sup> then this intention of Christ's must be co-extensive with those whom God has antecedently chosen to work.<sup>96</sup> In sum, Davenant insists, Christ died with special regard for the elect.<sup>97</sup>

### **A Rationale for a Universally Sufficient and Specially Efficacious Atonement: Four Hypotheses**

As we noted above, Davenant does not simply argue for his two-fold thesis. He also tries to explain it, to suggest a rationale for its plausibility. His basic premise, found here and there throughout his *Dissertation*, is that the atonement's sufficiency is greater than its saving efficacy because it was intended to do more than save.<sup>98</sup> Davenant, in fact, suggests the atonement had four purposes, four ends.

First, by applying the saving benefits of Christ's general redemption to the elect alone, God highlights his "special kindness toward the elect."<sup>99</sup> Second, Davenant insists that a general redemption allows ("that he might") God the opportunity to "afford a specimen of great mercy to the non-elect, at least towards those who are called into the church."<sup>100</sup> Third, a general redemption also leaves "unbelievers" (i.e., the *called* non-elect?) without excuse, since "a mode of liberating them was not wanting on the part of Christ."<sup>101</sup> And, finally, Davenant argues that a general redemption also "demonstrat[es]...[God's] supreme dominion, and free liberty towards those to whom he did not think fit even to reveal the means, which were supplied by himself for the salvation of mankind, and which were applicable by his own ordination to

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merited something for the elect, which he did not merit for others," 547; though cf. the citation of Zanchius on 548).

<sup>94</sup>Cf. John 15:5.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. Phil 2:13.

<sup>96</sup>See 533–34; see also 527–28.

<sup>97</sup>Thus, Nicole's remarks notwithstanding, I cannot see why Davenant would have had any trouble (much less have been "undoubtedly embarrass[ed]") signing the eighth article or the sixth rejection of the second head of doctrine in the Canons of Dort ("Moyses Amyraut and the Controversy on Universal Grace," 27–28).

<sup>98</sup>See, e.g., 354–55, 362, 369, 371–72, 379–85, 387–96, 462–63, 480–96, 551, 556. Cf. also Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 189–90.

<sup>99</sup>354; cf. 392.

<sup>100</sup>354.

<sup>101</sup>Cf. John 5:40 (354; cf. 362, 392); also John 3:17–18 (396–97).

any persons whatever."<sup>102</sup>

In short, were one to ask *why* the atonement's sufficiency and saving efficacy were not coterminous, Davenant would offer these four reasons. And, by offering them, Davenant intends to support the plausibility of the two-fold argument he marshals throughout his *Dissertation*.

### **A DISSERTATION ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST CRITIQUED**

Davenant's detailed argument is worth considering, but, of course, not uncritically. In fact, there are at least three places where Davenant's argument requires further attention.

First, Davenant raises important questions about *God's indiscriminate offer of the gospel*. He insists that such an offer demands a universally sufficient atonement. But his argument is unsatisfying. That is, while Davenant is surely right to say that what is accented in Scripture concerning the gospel's promises is not the secret, limiting decree of election but the availability of the gospel's offer, it is still another question whether this accent is necessarily underwritten by a universal provision. Davenant's argument, in fact, comes into trouble when he ventures an answer, saying a genuine provision is necessary so that the called, non-elect are without excuse on judgment day. His answer, it seems, is out of step with Paul, who says unbelievers are condemned based simply on their rejection of God's revelation in creation, in nature (Rom 1:18–32; see a slightly different argument in Rom 5:12, 18). Scripture, in fact, nowhere connects excusability/inexcusability with the extent of the atonement, but everywhere emphasizes human sin and God's free sovereignty (e.g., Rom 9).

Along these lines, Davenant's "evangelical covenant" attempts to explain several related features he surfaces from the biblical witness, besides the legitimation of the free offer—the distinction between the atonement's accomplishment and application, the necessity of faith, the persistence of God's wrath toward the non-believing (or pre-converted) elect, the just punishment of those for whom Christ died, and the scattered hints that God desires more than the elect to be saved or that Christ died for more than the elect. Still, his inference to this covenant is only as strong as these separate premises. Thus, were one to question his exegesis of the ostensibly universalist texts or, as we have just done, Davenant's basis for the gospel's free offer, this "evangelical covenant," becomes much less of an obvious inference.

Second, Davenant's argument raises questions about *substitution*.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Cf. Rom 9:18; Matt 20:15; Rom 9:20 (392). These, he suggests at one point, will indeed die in ignorance of the universal remedy; however, even in these cases, it will not be this ignorance but "their own demerits" which "caus[es]...their perdition. Thou has destroyed thyself" (alluding to Hos 13:9; 372).

<sup>103</sup>See, e.g., Robert Letham, who suggests penal substitution requires limited atonement (*The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology*; ed. Gerald Bray

Davenant maintains that Christ's death is both substitutionary and, for the non-elect, *non-effectual* (non-*savingly* effectual). He says, moreover, that this substitution involves Christ's payment for the sins of humanity. One may wonder, therefore, if Davenant's suspension of the atonement's efficacy on faith is sufficient to drive the kind of wedge he then drives between payment (and, thus, substitution) and application. That is, so much depends on whether this payment (this substitution) was made for more than the elect, because a wedge between payment (substitution) and application does not necessarily imply the possibility of *non-application*.<sup>104</sup>

Third—and this one will sound rather obvious—Davenant's argument raises an important question about the *intent* of the atonement. Owen's argument, of course, does something similar. Owen argues that Christ's death had a single intent, a single end: the ratification of the "covenant of redemption."<sup>105</sup> Owen argues that we can infer this end, we can infer this covenant's content, by noting the atonement's effect—the salvation of the elect.<sup>106</sup> His proposal, therefore, precludes, as a matter of definition, the idea of an intentionally non-applied death. On this basis, Owen would insist that Davenant's argument—atonement accomplished but not applied (or, in Owen's words an "ineffectual" atonement)—leads to Christ's purposes being frustrated and/or his merits refused—or doubly required. But, as Davenant's argument helpfully reminds us, this only follows if the atonement's purpose is understood in precisely the way Owen suggests. Davenant reminds us that simply because some are (intentionally) delivered from wrath via Christ's sacrifice does not automatically imply that Christ's sacrifice had no other purpose.<sup>107</sup>

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[Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 229), as does J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 37. See also Neil Chamber's interaction with this assertion ("A Critical Examination of John Owen's Argument for Limited Atonement in 'The Death of Christ,'" [Th.M. thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 1998], 371, n. 34), along with his suggested alternative (374).

<sup>104</sup>Related to this is, of course, the issue of double-jeopardy and eternal justification. On this tension, see, e.g., Owen, *Death of Death*, esp. 166–67; also, e.g., R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (repr. of 1871 ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 521; W. Sailer, "The Nature and Extent of the Atonement: A Wesleyan View," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 (Fall 1967):198; and David L. Allen, "The Atonement: Limited or Universal?" in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism: Reflections from the John 3:16 Conference* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 83–86 (where Davenant's response is also noted).

<sup>105</sup>On the fundamental role this covenant plays in Owen's argument, see, e.g., Carl Trueman (*The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* [Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 1998], 205).

<sup>106</sup>Cf. Chambers, "Critical Examination," 370. See also Rouwendal's similar observation concerning Gottchalk's rationale for positing limited atonement ("Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position," 319, n. 10)

<sup>107</sup>As noted above (see n. 13), Owen does admit to other purposes. He uses the language of intention when talking about the universal sufficiency of Christ's death

The trouble with Davenant's alternative, however, is that each of the four ends he suggests for the atonement are open to question. With respect to Davenant's first end, one wonders why God's special mercy could not be highlighted without a universally applicable death. And, additionally, one wonders if this particular end has Scriptural warrant. As for the second, one wonders why a universally applicable death is necessary for God to bestow the sort of benefits Davenant suggests are given to the non-elect who come under the preaching of the gospel. Moreover, does Scripture make these benefits dependent on the sort of atonement Davenant insists upon? Further, as for the third, as we have already noted above, it simply is not the case that a universally applicable atonement is necessary in order to remove the non-elect's excusability on the day of judgment. And, finally, as to the fourth end, it is an open question whether God required a universally applicable atonement in order to demonstrate his sovereign right to bestow the means of grace. Where in Scripture are these benefits clearly dependent on a universal provision?

### CONCLUSION

Davenant's *Dissertation* is worth considering. It is worth patiently outlining, summarizing and critically engaging. It is worth reading for oneself, preferably more than once. "It is," as Packer says of Owen's *Death of Death*, "hardly possible to grasp the strength and cogency of this massive statement on a first reading. The work must be read and re-read to be appreciated."<sup>108</sup> In fact, I would suggest that what Packer says earlier in his introduction should apply here as well—*mutatis mutandis*, "Nobody has a right to dismiss the doctrine of the limitedness of [the] atonement...until he has refuted Owen's [work]."<sup>109</sup> Perhaps *refuted* is a bit strong. I would be content with *considered*, even *read*. And to that end, *tolle lege*.

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(*Death of Death*, 184). And he acknowledges that non-*efficacious* grace or *common* grace was purchased by Christ's death (*Death of Death*, 250; cf. also 251, 202). In one or two places, moreover, he also acknowledges the "complexity" of the will of God (see, e.g., *Death of Death*, 232).

<sup>108</sup>"Introduction," 25.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.