



Article scientifique

Article

2025

Accepted version

Open Access

This is an author manuscript post-peer-reviewing (accepted version) of the original publication. The layout of the published version may differ .

Reformulating redemption : a study of the two powers distinction in Davenant and Owen and its implications for the extent of atonement

Seals, Zachary Willam

How to cite

SEALS, Zachary Willam. Reformulating redemption : a study of the two powers distinction in Davenant and Owen and its implications for the extent of atonement. In: Scottish journal of theology, 2025.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:184963>

Reformulating Redemption: A Study of the Two Powers Distinction in Davenant and Owen and its Implications for the Extent of Atonement

Medieval historians have long recognized the distinction between God's absolute (*potentia absoluta*) and ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) as a staple of medieval theology and often indicative of one's broader philosophical commitments albeit originally formulated in a theological context.¹ The distinction strikes immediately at the heart of the debate regarding the relationship between reason and faith, nature and grace, and the contingency of the created order. By the time of the late Middle Ages, it quickly became apparent any rigorous conceptual analysis or application of ideas concerning necessity and possibility required engagement with the distinction and theological enquiry in scholastic contexts frequently broached such a subject. Additionally, while recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of scholarly interest in the degrees of positive continuity which can be found between Reformed theology in the seventeenth and even sixteenth century and the medieval period, limited investigation has been given to how this central medieval distinction was deployed in Reformed systems. Even more importantly, consideration of the distinction in Reformed theology by historians is often restricted to theology proper or the nature and necessity of the atonement with ill regard for how the concept can inform the question of the extent of the atonement.² This paper seeks to fill this lacuna by considering two influential Reformed theologians in the seventeenth century: the bishop of Salisbury John Davenant and the Congregationalist Puritan John Owen.³ Davenant and Owen are perfect for this investigation as their educational background and engagement with medieval sources are sufficiently accessible. As Zahnd has wisely cautioned, when considering

¹ Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1963), 30-36.

² Francis Oakley, "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Theology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 3 (1998): 89. Oakley, citing Bavinck, notes a positive use of the distinction can be found in Polanus, Turretin, Alsted, and Heidegger, but does not explore their use further. For the two powers in the doctrine of God amongst the Reformed Orthodox see Sebastian Rehnman, "The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, vol. 40, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 2013, 385.

³ Carl Trueman, "Reformed Orthodoxy in Great Britain," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, 285, calls Owen "one of the most significant reformed orthodox thinkers of the seventeenth century."

claims of influence in the work of intellectual history a careful contextualization is required which distinguishes between explicit and implicit reception and considers the availability and knowledge of sources accessible to the authors at hand. Furthermore, both thinkers use the two powers distinction explicitly in their writings, albeit only Davenant specifically applies the concept to the extent of the atonement. Importantly, while considerable attention has been given to the distinctly Thomist influence amongst Reformed theologians in general and these two thinkers in particular, this paper seeks to qualify these legitimate assessments with the following conclusion: Davenant and Owen both understand the two powers distinction in a way that differs from Aquinas and reflect the shift of the concept in late medieval theology. Before considering Owen and Davenant however an overview of the distinction itself in the medieval period must be considered.

The Two Powers in Medieval Theology

Medieval scholasticism sought to integrate the data of biblical revelation as understood through centuries of church tradition with the insights of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophical reflection. Tension however often arose over how to integrate the philosophical positions of antiquity with the unique commitments required by Christian orthodoxy and the relationship between necessity and contingency was no exception. Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism tended to stress necessitarianism which when brought into conversation with Christian orthodoxy required qualification. For example, university theologians in the twelfth century often debated whether God could have redeemed mankind another way than through the incarnation or even whether the divine nature required there to be a redemption at all.⁴ Even earlier, in the late eleventh century Peter Damian was asserting a distinction between divine capacity and volition.⁵ Peter Abelard was famous for claiming God could only do what was decreed to be done in an attempt to protect divine goodness, but his view was rejected firmly by Lombard who enshrined the two powers distinction into medieval theology in his famous work *Sentences*. Drawing on the Augustinian precedent, there Lombard affirmed against Abelard “let us profess that God can do many things which he does not will, and can leave undone many

⁴ Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction Up to Its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 379.

⁵ Irvin Resnick, *Divine Power and Possibility in St Peter Damian's De Divina Omnipotentia*, (Brill: Leiden, 1992), 2.

things which he does.”⁶ Though Lombard does not use the strict terminology, here he lays out the heart of the two powers distinction: God’s capacity covers a broader range of possibilities than merely what is actualized through his will.⁷ Importantly, Courtney observes this distinction had a corresponding conceptual utilization in the developing notion of obediential potency (*potentia obedientialis*) in the twelfth century as well. What was it that explains how a miracle can occur which results in nature operating differently than before as in the case of a fire that does not burn? Courtney explains, for twelfth century theologians “all authors assumed there must be something inherent in the nature of the created thing that permits it to respond in both of these very different situations. . . . *Potentia obedientialis* was a natural inherent power but one that exceeded the common course of nature.”⁸ In other words, God has the capacity to act differently than what has in fact been decreed, and nature itself has the capacity to be realized differently than what is in the ordinary course of its operations. This raises the question then how miracles ought to be considered in relation to the two powers distinction. Do they fall in the category of the absolute or ordained power?

As with many medieval scholastic debates, the answer depends on the thinker being considered. For several early medieval theologians such as Godfrey of Poitiers, Alexander of Hales, and most importantly, Thomas Aquinas, miracles fall squarely into the category of the ordained power of God. This is due to the fact the distinction was considered to be an adverbial modification of the single power of God considered from different perspectives. On this view the absolute power is the divine capacity when it is abstracted from all action and only considered according to what is logically possible. Conversely, the ordained power consists in the order of nature God has established and decided to actualize as well as the temporary suspensions of that order as they unfold in history. On this account then there is no possibility of miracles being realized via God’s absolute power as the absolute power is by definition God’s capacity to act when considered apart from his particular volition. Aquinas makes this quite clear when he writes,

⁶ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Giulio Silano, 1st Edition. (Toronto: PIMS, 2007), 237.

⁷ Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten, eds., “Modalities in Francis Turretin: An Essay in Reformed Ontology,” in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt* (Brill, 2010), 89.

⁸ Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power*. Quodlibet 8. (Bergamo: PLubrina, 1990), 90.

“what is attributed to His power considered in itself, God is said to be able to do in accordance with His absolute power. Of such a kind is everything which has the nature of being, as was said above. What is, however, attributed to the divine power, according as it carries into execution the command of a just will, God is said to be able to do by His ordinary power. In this manner, we must say that God can do other things by His absolute power than those He has foreknown and pre-ordained He would do. But it could not happen that He should do anything which He had not foreknown, and had not pre-ordained that He would do, because His actual doing is subject to His foreknowledge and pre-ordination, though His power, which is His nature, is not so.”⁹

Thus, Oakley rightly concludes, “the absolute power for Aquinas then refers to God’s ability to do many things that he does not choose to do.” This applies to miracles as well which are foreordained by God to be temporary suspensions of the ordinary course of nature. As Helm argues, for Aquinas a miracle, “should it occur, is clearly not an exercise of the divine *potentia absoluta*, but of the *potentia ordinata*.”¹⁰ On this account the ordained power includes both the ordinary and extraordinary providential workings of God, but extraordinary causality must not be confused for absolute power. In the words of Courtenay, “no one before the middle of the thirteenth century viewed *potentia absoluta* as a type of divine action.”¹¹

A shift occurred however at some point from the thirteenth to fourteenth century with the typical scholarly focus resting on the canonist Hostiensis (d. 1271) who operationalized the divine absolute power into a parallel for the papal power to act through the *plenitudo potestatis* and supersede the current bounds of the religious order and establish a new law.¹² The question arose whether the pope was able to release a monk from their monastic vows and Hostiensis argued the pope could do so, not according to their ordained power but by their absolute power.¹³ This transition not only actualized the absolute power but led to an emphasis on absolute power being considered more as an authority to act in a certain manner rather than the mere capacity to

⁹ ST. I. Q25.A5. Rep1. See Moonan, *Divine Power*, 292-293, for a list of the various ways Aquinas applied the two powers distinction.

¹⁰ Paul Helm, *John Calvins Ideas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 316.

¹¹ Courtney, *Capacity and Volition*, 92.

¹² Oakley, *The Absolute and Ordained Power of God*, 442.

¹³ Francis Oakley, “Voluntarist Theology and Early-Modern Science: The Matter of the Divine Power, Absolute and Ordained,” *History of Science* 56, no. 1 (2018): 82.

do so.¹⁴ Though Scotus has been credited as the originator of applying this canonist definition of papal power to the theological analysis of God's power, it is unclear whether he can legitimately be interpreted as endorsing the canonist definition or retaining the earlier view.¹⁵ In either case, what is most important to note here is that this shift did not occur as a distinctly Franciscan, or even necessarily voluntarist, emphasis. Recall, the earlier view was retained by both Dominicans (Aquinas, Albert the Great) and Franciscans (Summa Halensis, Bonaventure) and the canonists shift was eventually held by both Franciscans (Ockham) and Dominicans (Holcot).¹⁶ Additionally, for thinkers committed to this view, such as Gregory of Rimini or Pierre d'Ailly, miracles more easily fit under the category of the *potentia absoluta* which was already operationalized.¹⁷ Thus, this version of the distinction, held by Ockham amongst others,¹⁸ became increasingly popular and was considered to be the predominant position within intellectual discourse in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.¹⁹ A look at various Reformed thinkers however will reveal both formulations of the distinction.

The Two Powers in Reformed Theology

John Calvin, for example, repeatedly criticizes the notion of a *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* throughout his theological writings and commentaries for he finds the terminology to be indicative of a scholastic excess of speculation without due reflection on the revelation of God. Steinmetz has argued Calvin not only rejects the abuse of the concept, a

¹⁴ In addition to Hostiensis, Courtney surveys a few other reasons which account for the gradual shift to an operationalized view of the absolute power in late medieval theology, *The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages*, in T. Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*. (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Springer, 1985), 257-285.

¹⁵ See Courtney for the canonist view, and Henri Veldhuis "Ordained and Absolute Power in Scotus' Ordinatio I 44." *Vivarium* 38, no. 2 (2000): 222-30 in response. Cf. Massimiliano Traversino Di Cristo, "The Classic Age of the Distinction between God's Absolute and Ordered Power", *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 76. (2018), 208. Hester Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in Dominican Theology at Oxford, 1300-1350*, Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 318, argues Scotus held a mediating position where he affirms God's establishing new ordained systems via absolute power but also through the use of simultaneous instants of nature.

¹⁶ Though, with Kennedy, it should be admitted the operationalized account had a greater prominence amongst the Franciscans in the fourteenth century and the Thomists of the fifteenth century were considerably more cautious than the nominalists and Scotists. Leonard Kennedy, "Early Fourteenth Century Franciscans and Divine Absolute Power", *Franciscan Studies*, St. Bonaventure University, 1990, 197-233. Ibid., "The Fifteenth Century and the Divine Absolute Power", *Vivarium*, Brill, vol 27, No. 2, (1989), 125-152.

¹⁷ David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, Second Edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42-44.

¹⁸ John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 304.

¹⁹ Oakley, *The Absolute and Ordained Power of God*, 452.

reading argued for by Turretin, but the very utility of the distinction entirely.²⁰ For Steinmetz Calvin's consideration of absolute power is entirely divorced from justice and revelation which results in undue speculation on the divine nature. His reading has been persuasively challenged however by Paul Helm who notes that even the earlier adherents of the two powers distinction did not attempt to conceive of God's absolute power separated from his essentially holy and just nature. The mere observation that God could have decreed otherwise than he in fact did is not equivalent to claiming the consideration of all logical possibilities is entirely unrelated to the essential characteristics of the divine nature. In other words, the *potentia absoluta* need not be construed in an arbitrary fashion or abstracted from what has been revealed about the character of God. In the words of Helm, "For Calvin the inscrutable decree of God is therefore not a decree of pure power divorced from all other features of the divine nature it is the decree of a necessarily holy and righteous God."²¹ This interpretation of Calvin is compelling and reflective not only of the earlier Thomistic formulation but of other early Reformed thinkers as well.²² Peter Martyr Vermigli was more explicitly engaged with the medieval tradition than Calvin and shows his familiarity with debates surrounding the *potentia absoluta* when he writes, "it is commonly said in the schools that God cannot do anything that implies a self-contradiction."²³ Furthermore, Vermigli defines miracles, not as the imposition of the absolute power of God, as found in Luther,²⁴ but rather as "a difficult and unusual work of divine power, surpassing every capacity of created nature."²⁵ That the power is "unusual" means it is not the establishment of a new ordained system entirely and is a rare occurrence.²⁶ Calvin and Vermigli were followed by

²⁰ Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 49-50.

²¹ Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 332.

²² R. T. te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: A Study in Method and Content*, vol. 25, Studies in Reformed Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 238.

²³ Pietro Martire Vermigli, *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), 64.

²⁴ Oakley, *The Absolute and Ordained Power*, 456. Robert Preuss, attempting to summarize the theology of Lutheran Orthodoxy from figures such as Abraham Calov, argues "God's power is said to be absolute when He works apart from the usual *causae secundae*. An example of such power is the creation of all things, but also God's preparing a virgin, His raising the dead, etc." *The Theology of Post Reformation Lutheranism*, Vol II, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 106-107. Johann Gerhard evidences an operationalized view of the absolute power as well in *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin Mayes, (St Louis: Concordia House Publishing, 2007), 196.

²⁵ Vermigli, *Ibid*, 199.

²⁶ In later Reformed orthodoxy this power would come to be termed *potentia extrarordinaria* as distinguished from the *potentia ordinaria*. Richard Muller notes other Reformed figures such as Thomas Manton, classify the *potentia extrarordinaria* under the *potentia ordinata* yet his discussion does not explain the shift in meaning the *potentia absoluta* underwent throughout medieval theology so his presentation of Reformed theologians from this era needs

Ames in considering miracles as part of God's extraordinary providence but part of his ordained power rather than absolute power. Ames explicitly defines the *potentia absoluta* as "that whereby God is able to do all things possible, even though they never shall be" and the *potentia ordinata* as "that whereby he not only can do that which he wills, but also indeed actually does whatever he wills."²⁷ Interestingly, Herman Bavinck claims this Augustinian and Thomist version of the distinction was "generally accepted by Reformed theologians" and cites Polanus, Alsted, Heidegger, and Van Mastricht in support.²⁸ Indeed, Van Mastricht certainly seems to support this view as he defines the absolute power "insofar as we conceive it as preceding his will and ordained power insofar as we conceive it as following his will."²⁹ Examples of this position amongst the Reformed could be multiplied,³⁰ and yet, Bavinck fails to note the proponents of the alternative formulation of the two powers distinction amongst the Reformed. Gisbertus Voetius for example, is explicit that God does miracles by his absolute power and thus reflects the later canonist's formulation which operationalized the *potentia absoluta*.³¹ Rather than surveying the Reformed tradition here focus will be given to John Owen and John

to be supplemented. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Vol. 3, The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 537.

²⁷ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity, Drawne out of the Holy Scriptures ...* (London: Edward Griffin, 1642), 24.

²⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 2: God and Creation*, trans. John Bolt, (Ada: Baker Books, 2004), 249. Insofar as Bavinck is using the term "Augustinian and Thomist" to describe a rejection of what he sees as the nominalist thesis that God could will even contradictions, he is correct to point to these Reformed theologians as rejecting such a view. Yet, according to the taxonomy laid out in this work, such as Aquinas' rejection of an operationalized absolute power, Bavinck's historical claims need qualification. For example, unlike Aquinas, Polanus held to an operationalized account of God's absolute power. "Dicitur *absoluta*, quia non est limitata universali lege naturae, quasi praeter & supra illam non posset Deus quicquam facere. Vocatur etiam *omnipotentia Dei extraordinaria*, quia per illam potest Deus agere praeter consuetum ordinem naturae, producendo se solo tam effecta secundorum agentium, quam alia, ad quae res creatae pertingere non possunt." *Syntagma theologiae christianae*, (Geneva, 1617), 1192.

²⁹ Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology: Faith in the Triune God*, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 432.

³⁰ Marcus Wendelin, *Christianae theologiae libri duo*, (Amstelodami), 1657, 87. Edward Leigh, *A Body of Divinity*, (London: William Lee), 1662, 236. James Ussher, *A body of divinitie*, (London: Downes), 1645, 47-48.

³¹ Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy And Philosophy: 1625-1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus Van Mastricht, And Anthonius Driessen*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 199. See Andreas Beck, *Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) on God, Freedom, and Contingency: An Early Modern Reformed Voice*, (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 421-430, for a thorough analysis of Voetius' account of the two powers, though, surprisingly Beck does not engage with Voetius' comments regarding miracles as noted by Goudriaan. Nevertheless, he concludes, "In my view, the crucial question is not whether God can really act de potentia absoluta (neither Scotus nor Voetius deny this) but whether God can act inordinate, that is, contrary to his nature (this extremely nominalist position is excluded by Thomas, Scotus, and Voetius)", 427. See also Matthew C. Baines, "Gisbertus Voetius's (1589-1676) Doctrine of Participation: Its Scholastic and Mystical Sources," PhD diss., (University of Edinburgh, 2023), 122, who details Voetius' operationalized view of the absolute power while still acknowledging the utility of the older formulation.

Davenant, each of which were educated in the medieval debates broadly and reflected the later canonist position on the two powers like Voetius.

An examination of John Owen's library reveals his acquaintance with medieval scholastic debates in theology, as he was taught well by his superintendent in metaphysics and theology Thomas Barlow, which is witnessed by his editions of Lombard, Aquinas, and Ockham amongst others. Sebastian Rehman has argued Owen showed a particular favoritism of Aquinas above other medieval theologians like Bernard or Scotus and his conclusions have recently been supported by a more in-depth study from Christopher Cleveland.³² Though both of these scholars are likely correct when Owens theology is considered as a whole, with regards to the particular use of the two powers distinction Owen fits better in the later canonists position rather than the earlier view found in Aquinas. Repeatedly, Owen will use the phrase "absolute power" to refer not to the mere capacity to realize a range of possibilities, rather the term is synonymous with the authority to legitimately impose a law. Thus, in *Christologia* (1679) Christ has the "absolute power and disposal of all the good things we pray for"³³ and in the *Discourse on the Holy Spirit* (1674) "the command of God proceeds from the absolute power of a sovereign legislator."³⁴ In *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656) he even contrasts absolute power with a power that is "clothed with mercy" which reflects Calvin's concern that the absolute power not be considered divorced from the other divine attributes.³⁵ In his first work, *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), he uses the term to describe the Arminian view of the sovereignty of the human will to resist God³⁶ and later in *Truth and Innocence Vindicated* (1669) pairs the term with the concept of the magistrate, albeit in his arguments against their absolute authority.³⁷ Finally, Owen uses the term in ecclesiastical contexts where he argues absolute power is not given to the church to be used over its members. In *True Nature of a Gospel Church* (published posthumously in 1689) Owen writes, "those who were in supreme absolute power as kings and

³² Sebastian Rehman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Baker Pub Group, 2002). Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013).

³³ John Owen, "Christologia: or A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of The Person of Christ God and Man" in Vol 1 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1850), 163.

³⁴ Ibid., "Discourse on the Holy Spirit", vol 3, 610.

³⁵ Ibid., "Mortification of Sin in Believers", vol 6, 277.

³⁶ Ibid., "A Display of Arminianism", vol 10, 15.

³⁷ Ibid., "Truth and Innocence Vindicated", vol 13, 381, 382, 438. Cf. "Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants", vol 14, 522.

princeps are never called elders.”³⁸ In all these cases Owen uses the term “absolute power” as a way of emphasizing the authority and irresistible efficacy of the volitional act rather than the earlier medieval view of the possibilities at hand prior to any act of the will. Yet, curiously, there is one passage where Owen directly defines the two-power distinction in a way that undermines his typical usage throughout his works. In his *Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653) in the middle of the debate regarding the necessity of the atonement, Owen makes the following distinction:

“It is well known that the word “impossibility” may be considered in a twofold point of view. The first is in itself *absolute*, which respects the absolute power of God, antecedent to any free act of the divine will: in this respect, it was not impossible that that cup should pass from Christ. The second is *conditional*, which respects the power of God, as directed in a certain order, that is determined, and (if I might so phrase it) circumscribed by some act of the divine will: and in this sense it was impossible; that is to say, it being supposed that God willed to pardon any sins to sinners, it could not be done without laying their punishment upon the surety”³⁹

Here Owen lays out the standard early medieval understanding of the distinction. Interestingly, here we have a parallel case to what Courtenay has argued regarding Scotus’ use of the distinction. Whereas, on Courtenay’s view, Scotus’s typical usage of the distinction is in line with the early medieval view, in one passage where he offers a direct definition of the two powers, he appears to shift to the canonist position in order to grant more authority to the papal position.⁴⁰ In the mirror Owenian case it must be admitted an interpretation that concludes an author is self-contradictory must be broached cautiously and with great consideration. Nevertheless, it is not entirely unlikely in the more polemical and specifically scholastic debates Owen was having on the necessity of the atonement he appealed to what he considered a “well known” distinction amongst his favorite medieval authors, most of which were early, while thereby forgetting his standard occasional usage of the term “absolute power” reflected a different definition which was more popular in political settings in his day.

³⁸ Ibid., “True Nature of a Gospel Church”, vol 16, 111.

³⁹ John Owen, “A Dissertation on Divine Justice”, vol 10, 558.

⁴⁰ Courtney, *Capacity and Volition*, 91.

It should be noted Owen at this point had famously shifted from his earlier stance on the necessity of the atonement for the forgiveness of sins which was defended in his work *The Death of Death* (1648).⁴¹ There Owen had argued, in harmony with other Reformed theologians such as William Twisse and Samuel Rutherford, that God could have saved humanity merely by willing so apart from the incarnation and death of Christ.⁴² Twisse had even claimed this position fundamentally depended on a correct understanding of the two-power distinction which did not operationalize the *potentia absoluta*.⁴³ Yet, as Schendel observes, despite Twisse's express definition, in at least one place he seemed to use the term "absolute power" in an active way, much like Owen.⁴⁴ Schendel goes to great lengths to explain what he considers Twisse's "infelicitous"⁴⁵ language in a way which harmonizes his usage with the classical distinction between the two powers, but the close reading he provides of a specific passage in Twisse cannot equally explain Owens numerous references to an active absolute power throughout his corpus. The survey provided above has shown Owen uses the term "absolute power" in a wide variety of contexts throughout his writings with a consistent preference for the connotation of "legitimate authority to act" in a way which comports with the canonist rather than the classical understanding.

Before analyzing the impact of this distinction theologically however, a brief word should be said regarding Owen's most qualified opponent concerning the extent of the atonement in the Reformed tradition: John Davenant.

Though Davenant's specific treatise on the extent of the atonement *De Morte Christi* was not published until 1650 posthumously, Lynch claims it "began as lectures at Cambridge around

⁴¹ Carl Trueman, "The Necessity of the Atonement," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael Haykin and Mark Jones, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 204-222.

⁴² Carl Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 95.

⁴³ Joshua Schendel, *The Necessity of Christ's Satisfaction: A Study of the Reformed Scholastic Theologians William Twisse (1578–1646) and John Owen (1616–1683)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 106-107.

⁴⁴ Here Schendel has in mind William Twisse, *The Riches of God's love on vessels of mercy consistent with his absolute hatred or reprobation of the vessels of wrath*, (Oxford: 1653) I, 150, and *Vindiciae gratiae potestatis ac providentiae Dei*, (Amsterdam: 1648), I.II digr. 4, 180. Consider his treatment in *The Necessity of Christ's Satisfaction*, *ibid.*, 112-115.

⁴⁵ Schendel, *ibid.*, 114.

the time of the Synod of Dordt in 1619” and was “ready for publication by 1628.”⁴⁶ Lamentably, this means its composition significantly predated any of Owens work so there is no record of Davenant specifically responding to Owen’s stance on the atonement or formulation of the two powers. Yet, for Davenant’s own views his *Animadversions* published in 1641 contains references to the absolute power of God which are worth considering. Here Davenant exemplifies the operationalized view of the absolute power which is seen in his affirmation that God “has an absolute power and freedom to make men do any good whereunto he maketh promise of reward.”⁴⁷ Likewise later he writes, “if we reject the doctrine of absolute Predestination we must withal of necessity abridge God of his absolute power over the wills of men. It is therefore no small issue that we make of this doctrine when we learn from thence that God hath an omnipotent power of turning the hearts of men.”⁴⁸ Both of these citations reflect an understanding of the absolute power as an active and efficacious force. Correspondingly, Davenant’s definition of the *potentia ordinata* found in *De Morte Christi* (1650) reflects the canonist formulation which stresses the legal imposition of a law to be obeyed rather than strictly the realization of the divine will. Thus, citing Banez approvingly, Davenant defines the absolute power merely as God’s ability to do anything logically possible, something proponents of both formulations would have affirmed, but the ordained power of God is “any common law given and promulgated by God according to which anything is understood as possible to be done or not to be done or also according to the common course of natural or moral things.”⁴⁹ Defining the ordained power of God merely as the “common course of natural or moral things” allows one to affirm the *potentia absoluta* as the grounds for miracles as well as the source of changes in the ordained order such as the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. Though Davenant does not explicitly link the *potentia absoluta* to miracles in his writings, that this is the correct interpretation of the *potentia ordinata* is confirmed by his argument that all living humans have an obligation to obey the call for repentance and faith whereas this is impossible

⁴⁶ Michael Lynch, *John Davenant’s Hypothetical Universalism: A Defense of Catholic and Reformed Orthodoxy*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

⁴⁷ John Davenant, *Animadversions Written by the Right Reverend Father in God John, Lord Bishop of Sarisbury, Upon a Treatise Intituled Gods Love to Mankind* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1641). 226.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 518.

⁴⁹ John Davenant, *Dissertationes Duae: Prima De Morte Christi, Quatenus ad omnes extendatur, Quatenus ad solos Electos restringatur. Altera De Praedestinatione & Reprobatione*. (Cambridge: Roger Daniels, 1650), 51. ‘Ea autem accipitur in ordine ad legem aliquam commune datam & promulgatam a Deo, secundum quam aliquid intelligitur possibile fieri vel non fieri, aut etiam secundum commune cursum rerum naturalium vel moralium, ut recte Bannes.’

for the damned. This is not only true for the *potentia ordinata* however as Davenant affirms “not only according to the absolute power of God but according to his ordinary power any unbelieving and impenitent person whatsoever may be endued with true repentance and saving faith.”⁵⁰ It appears Davenant believes that though the universal order is such that all are commanded to have faith, and there is even a sense in which all have the capacity for faith (something which would be denied by Owen), when God actually grants repentance and faith, it is infallibly efficacious due to divine absolute power. Once again, the operationalized view of the *potentia absoluta* is presumed.

The Two Powers Applied to the Extent of the Atonement

With this extensive groundwork laid the final point can be made quite briefly. Though Davenant and Owen both use the two powers distinction the same way only Davenant applies the concept to the matter of the extent of the atonement which reflects a more consistent approach with his theological commitments elsewhere. For example, Davenant is committed to the proposition that the condition of faith is possible for all men.⁵¹ For Davenant this stems from God’s ordained system of preaching the Gospel to all men because there was a real offer for all men such that satisfaction has been made for them and will be applied upon the condition of faith.⁵² Thus, Davenant’s position is a form of Hypothetical Universalism. Moreover, Davenant recognizes that not all God-appointed ends are realized; thus, all men are made with the capacity for faith, though it is never realized; not unlike the natural capacity to learn and speak a foreign language though it is never actualized. To be clear, for Davenant it is God’s gift of faith and repentance which realizes this natural capacity rather than an intrinsic human volition, but the capacity is there via the ordained system nevertheless. Problematically, for Owen there is a recognition that God could do other than what he has done, which is the heart of the two powers distinction, and there is a recognition that God has ordained an order in which all are commanded to repent, yet there is no corresponding admission that there is any natural potency

⁵⁰ Davenant, *Dissertationes Duae*, 51. ‘Ergo non solum juxta potentiam Dei absolutam sed secundum potentiam ordinariam quivis incredulus & impenitens potest vera poenitentia & fide salutisera donari.’

⁵¹ Davenant, *Dissertationes Duae*, 49.

⁵² Ibid., 69, “Hisce duabus thesibus subjunximus tertiam, qua ostensum est, Posita hac universali virtute mortis Christi, atque hoc universali foedere Evangelico ad quemlibet hominem spectante, tamen hanc vel illam singularem personam habere quidem solo beneficio hujus mortis Deum obligatum ad pacem cum illo ineundam, vitamque illi donandum, si crediderit; non autem habere actualem justificationem aut reconciliationem, sive actualem statum gratiae & salutis, antequam credat.”

within nonelected human creatures to believe. This is inconsistent, as Davenant points out, for this position would logically demand the view that the reprobate are in the same position to Christ as the fallen angels; a view which is clearly absurd as the gospel call is intended to reach all mankind including the reprobate while the fallen angels are excluded from such an offer.⁵³ In order to avoid the view that reprobate humans are in the same position as reprobate angels, one must affirm humans have a natural capacity (*potentia obedientialis*) for faith. Surprisingly however, Owen goes a step further when he argues “commands do not signify what is God’s intention should be done but what is our duty to do which may be made known to us whether we be able to perform it or not: it signifieth no intention or purpose of God.”⁵⁴ This is surprising for earlier it was shown Owen affirmed the absolute power of God to impress a law of holiness upon the created order but here we find that Owen does not consider divine commands to necessarily be linked to the will of God whatsoever.⁵⁵ This kind of disjunction between Owen’s usage of the distinction to ground ethical imperatives from the divine law elsewhere but rejection of the distinction in matters of the extent of the atonement is telling. Had Owen applied the difference between God’s absolute power which cannot be frustrated and his ordained power (a common law) which is regularly frustrated (in a qualified sense) by the presence of sin in the world it seems he could have more consistently applied his typical Reformed and robust doctrine of divine providence⁵⁶ which stresses the sovereign will of God and yet recognizes the permission of evil in the world.

Summary

This work has attempted to not only be a historical survey of how the rich conceptual distinction of the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* shifted over the centuries, was a staple

⁵³ Michael Lynch, *John Davenant’s Hypothetical Universalism*, 120.

⁵⁴ Owen, vol 10, 68. See Martin Foord, “John Owen’s Gospel Offer: Well-Meant or Not?” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*. ed. Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 286-296. Ford points out Owen specifically denies, “that God has a natural affection” (an inclination according to his nature) that all people be saved” as such would compromise on Owens view, God’s blessedness and omnipotence, 293.

⁵⁵ In relation to this see Timothy Barnes, *A Great King Above All Gods: Dominion and Divine Government in the Theology of John Owen* (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, 2016), 133-135. Barnes points out Owen insisted God can have proper obligations to his creatures whereas Davenant merely affirmed God keeps obligations out of his faithfulness rather than justice. Cf, Barnes, *ibid* 179-181.

⁵⁶ Jordan Ballor, Matthew Gaetano, and David Sytsma, eds., *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis: The Dynamics of Protestant and Catholic Soteriology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), note Owen even affirmed physical premotion, 8.

of medieval theology, and was utilized by various Reformed theologians, but also provide an analysis of how it could be consistently applied to the question of the extent of the atonement. In this light, John Davenant's position was found to be more textconsistent than John Owen's, albeit with the recognition both thinkers utilized an operationalized form of the distinction which reflected a later fourteenth century strain of theology and disagrees with Aquinas' approach. Here a lesson can be learned not to presume Aquinas was the only giant of the medieval period or even that frequent positive citation of his works implies universal agreement. On the contrary, it is quite likely Owen and Davenant were unaware of the shift in definition throughout the Middle Ages and were simply reflecting the predominant usage of their time. In either case, this qualification should not be read as a rejection of the influence Thomas had upon the Reformed but rather as a caution against over emphasizing his prominence to the neglect of other medieval thinkers such as Scotus. Additionally, this research has uncovered significantly more work needs to be done in considering how these two formulations of divine omnipotence were applied by Reformed theologians in other doctrinal loci such as covenant theology.

Bibliography

- Ames, William. *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity, Drawne out of the Holy Scriptures ...* London: Edward Griffin, 1642.
- Baines, Matthew. “Gisbertus Voetius’s (1589-1676) Doctrine of Participation: Its Scholastic and Mystical Sources” PhD diss. University of Edinburgh, 2023.
- Ballor, Jordan, Matthew Gaetano, and David Sytsma, eds. *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis: The Dynamics of Protestant and Catholic Soteriology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Brill, 2019.
- Timothy Barnes, “A Great King Above All Gods: Dominion and Divine Government in the Theology of John Owen” PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, 2016
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics : Volume 2: God and Creation*. Baker Books, 2004.
- Beck, Andreas. *Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) on God, Freedom, and Contingency: An Early Modern Reformed Voice*, Leiden: Brill, 2022.
- Cleveland, Christopher. *Thomism in John Owen*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013.
- Courtenay, William J. *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power*. Quodlibet 8. Bergamo: PLubrina, 1990.
- . *The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages*, in T.Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*. Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Springer, 1985
- . *Ockham and Ockhamism: Studies in the Dissemination and Impact of His Thought*. Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters Bd. 99. Leiden: Brill, 2008
- Cristo, Massimiliano Traversino Di. “The Classic Age of the Distinction between God’s Absolute and Ordered Power”, *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 76. (2018), 207-266.

- Davenant, John. *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*. Vol. II. London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co, 1832.
- *Animadversions Written by the Right Reverend Father in God John, Lord Bishop of Sarisbury, Upon a Treatise Intitled Gods Love to Mankind*. Roger Daniel, 1641.
- Foord, Martin. "John Owen's Gospel Offer: Well-Meant or Not?" in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*. ed. Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones, Burlington: Ashgate, 2012, 286-296.
- Gelber, Hester. *It Could Have Been Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in Dominican Theology at Oxford, 1300-1350*. Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters. Brill, 2004.
- Gerhard, Johann. *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin Mayes, St Louis: Concordia House Publishing, 2007.
- Goudriaan, Aza. *Reformed Orthodoxy And Philosophy, 1625/1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus Van Mastricht, And Anthonius Driessen*. 1st Edition. Brill, 2006.
- Helm, Paul. *John Calvin's Ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Kennedy, Leonard. "Early Fourteenth Century Franciscans and Divine Absolute Power", *Franciscan Studies*, St. Bonaventure University, 1990, 197-233.
- . "The Fifteenth Century and the Divine Absolute Power", *Vivarium*, vol 27, No. 2, (1989), 125-152.
- Leigh, Edward. *A Body of Divinity*, London: William Lee, 1662,
- Lombard, Peter. *The Sentences Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity*. Translated by Giulio Silano. 1st Edition.. Toronto: PIMS, 2007.
- Lynch, Michael. *John Davenant's Hypothetical Universalism: A Defense of Catholic and Reformed Orthodoxy*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Marenbon, John. *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction*. Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006.
- Moonan, Lawrence. *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction Up to Its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas*. Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Muller, Richard. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Vol. 3, The Divine Essence and Attributes*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

- Oakley, Francis. "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Theology." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 3 (1998): 437-.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3653896>.
- . "Voluntarist Theology and Early-Modern Science: The Matter of the Divine Power, Absolute and Ordained." *History of Science* 56, no. 1 (2018): 72–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275317722241>.
- Oberman, Heiko Augustinus. *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Owen, John. *The Works of John Owen*. Edited by W.H Goold. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1850.
- Preuss, Robert. *The Theology of Post Reformation Lutheranism*, Vol II, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972
- Polanus, Amandus. *Syntagma theologiae christianae*, Geneva, 1617
- Resnick, Irvn. *Divine Power and Possibility in St. Peter Damian's De Divina Omnipotentia*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.
- Rehnman, Sebastian. *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*. Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought. Baker Pub Group, 2002.
- . "The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy." In *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, 40:351–401. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 2013.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004248915_014.
- Joshua Schendel, *The Necessity of Christ's Satisfaction: A Study of the Reformed Scholastic Theologians William Twisse (1578–1646) and John Owen (1616–1683)*, Leiden: Brill, 2022
- Selderhuis, Herman. *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Steinmetz, David. *Calvin in Context*. Second Edition. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Trueman, Carl. "The Necessity of the Atonement," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael Haykin and Mark Jones, Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011
- . *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021

- Twisse, William. *The Riches of God's love on vessels of mercy consistent with his absolute hatred or reprobation of the vessels of wrath*, (Oxford: 1653)
- . *Vindiciae gratiae potestatis ac providentiae Dei*, (Amsterdam: 1648)
- Ussher, James. *A body of divinitie*, London: Downes, 1645.
- Van Mastricht, Petrus. *Theoretical-Practical Theology: Faith in the Triune God*. Vol. II. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020.
- Veldhuis, Henri. "Ordained and Absolute Power in Scotus' Ordinatio I 44." *Vivarium* 38, no. 2 (2000): 222–30.
- Velde, R. T. te. *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: A Study in Method and Content*. Vol. 25. Studies in Reformed Theology. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Vermigli, Pietro Martire. *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*. Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996.
- Wendelin, Marcus. *Christianae theologiae libri duo*, Amstelodami, 1657.
- Wisse, Maarten, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten, eds. "Modalities in Francis Turretin: An Essay in Reformed Ontology." In *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*. Brill, 2010. <https://brill.com/view/title/18444>.
- Zahnd, Ueli. *Calvin, Calvinism, and Medieval Thought*. Oxford University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198728818.013.4>.