

FOR GOD'S  
*Glory*  
AND THE  
CHURCH'S  
*Consolation*



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400 YEARS OF THE SYNOD OF DORDT

RONALD L. CAMMENGA, EDITOR



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Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

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616-457-5970

[rfpa.org](http://rfpa.org)

[mail@rfpa.org](mailto:mail@rfpa.org)

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Synod of Dordt, 1618–19, is, for good reason, often referred to as “the great synod.” *Great* is certainly the right adjective to describe the Synod of Dordt. It was great because of the central issue with which the synod dealt. That issue was the heresy of Arminianism that had infected the Dutch Reformed churches. So critical was the error that the embrace of it meant a fundamental denial of the gospel of grace. Clearly, great things were at stake, so far as the church was concerned. No greater issue can be imagined than the issue that confronted the Synod of Dordt. Is man saved because of his own works and will, or because of the efficacious grace of God? Who ought to receive the glory for salvation? Does glory belong to God alone, or does man, at least in part, receive a portion of the glory? Clearly, there is no greater issue.

The Synod of Dordt was also great because of the representation at the synod. The Dutch Reformed churches understood that the error that was troubling their churches was not unique to them. They were keenly aware that this error was not uniquely Dutch but was an error that was no respecter of persons. It was an error that threatened the Reformed faith everywhere. Seeing that and understanding the truth of the oneness and catholicity of the church, the Dutch invited representatives of the Reformed faith from around the world—and they came, they contributed, and they joined hands with the Dutch in condemning the heresy that threatened the universal church of Christ. Great was the Synod of Dordt in its scope.

And great has the Synod of Dordt proved to be in the history of the Reformed church that followed Dordt. Great has the synod been

in its enduring legacy. For generations—fifteen or sixteen generations—the Synod of Dordt has served with its clear articulation of the truth and its uncompromising rejection of error. In the church and on the mission field, the Canons of Dordt have served as the confessional standard for instruction in the doctrines of grace—the five points of Calvinism.

But the Synod of Dordt was much more than the Canons of Dordt and the Arminian heresy. It dealt with the matter of a proper view and observance of the New Testament Sabbath, establishing principles that serve the church today. It dealt with Bible translation, authorizing a new Dutch translation of the Bible, the *Statenvertaling*. It dealt with church polity and formulated the Church Order that is still in use in Reformed churches around the world. It dealt with church-state issues, and although more would need to be done following Dordt, it showed the way by insisting that the church must be free to govern its own affairs. Dordt was polemical and showed how properly the church ought to deal with error and errorists. And in so many other ways, the work done by the Synod of Dordt endures to the present. Throughout the centuries following Dordt, like the aging fig tree of Psalm 92:14, its fruit would only ripen and become the sweeter. Great was the Synod of Dordt!

The chapters in this book began as speeches at a conference sponsored by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS). The theme of the conference was *Dordt 400: Safeguarding the Reformed Tradition*. Among the speakers were faculty members of PRTS, ministers in the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRCA), and ministers from churches with whom the PRCA have official ecumenical relationships. The conference was hosted by the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan. Trinity's evangelism committee did a great deal of work in planning, advertising, and arranging the conference, for which the seminary was deeply appreciative. The conference was spread over three days



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and was very well attended. There were many out-of-state visitors, as well as numerous foreign guests. Special arrangements were made, making possible the presence of as many friends of the PRCA from abroad as were able to attend. In their honor, a pre-conference banquet was held, which provided an opportunity for our guests to become acquainted with each other. Just as delegates to the Synod of Dordt came from abroad, so did many come from abroad to commemorate with us the anniversary of the Synod of Dordt. Great was our celebration.

Although before the conference the seminary faculty had already made plans with the Reformed Free Publishing Association to publish the speeches given at the conference, many who attended the conference expressed the hope that the speeches would be made into a book. What we believed going into the conference, many who attended the conference confirmed—that the material presented is of enduring value. In addition, a book reaches a wider audience than a three-day conference. And that too is our hope.

With deepest appreciation and thanksgiving to the Lord for what he wrought at the Synod of Dordt, and with the prayer that Dordt's unique contribution may impact future generations, we are glad to present this book. May the Lord use it to endear to us and to our children the Reformed tradition that was preserved and developed through the Synod of Dordt. May the zeal for the truth and the boldness in rejecting heresy also be our zeal and boldness. And may it be the zeal and boldness of our children and our children's children, as well as all who embrace the doctrines of grace that were defended by the great synod.

—Ronald L. Cammenga, editor  
Wyoming, Michigan  
May 2019



# Chapter 1

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## CONTROVERSY REGARDING SOVEREIGN GRACE: THE SYNOD OF DORDT AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

Douglas J. Kuiper

### Introduction

November 13, 2018, marked the four hundredth anniversary of the opening of the Synod of Dordt. Four centuries later, how ought we to evaluate this synod?

Throughout the centuries some have expressed their praises of the synod in superlatives. One church historian has said that it was “the greatest synod of Reformed churches ever held.”<sup>1</sup> Another has expressed the judgment that it was “one of the two or three decisive events in the history of the Netherlands.”<sup>2</sup> Yet another has referred to the Synod of Dordt as the “most holy Synod.”<sup>3</sup> Expressing the

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- 1 B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 268.
  - 2 Peter Y. DeJong, ed., “The Rise of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618–1619* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), 1.
  - 3 As quoted by David Engelsma, “The Significance of Dordt for Today,” in *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 36. Additionally, Gerard Brandt relates what Wolfgang Mayer, minister in Basil,

same idea in other words, the church historian J. Wylie says, "Than the Synod of Dort there is perhaps no more remarkable Assembly in the annals of the Protestant Church."<sup>4</sup> Should we evaluate the synod similarly?

At the same time the criticisms of the Synod of Dort have also been sharp. One would expect nothing less from Remonstrant sympathizers.<sup>5</sup> However, even some who are more orthodox have criticized the synod. John Hales and Walter Balcanquhall wrote letters to Dudley Carleton (the political ambassador from Britain to the United Provinces of the Netherlands) regarding the proceedings of the synod.<sup>6</sup> Informed only by these letters, the English-speaking people have long understood "that the Synod was relentlessly partisan and severe in its doctrine; that the Dutch provincial delegates were extreme, biased, and ignorant parties who had complete control over the debates and the decisions; that the Canons themselves were drawn up in private and foisted upon the

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Switzerland, did whenever anyone in his presence made mention of the Synod of Dort: "He frequently stiled them the holy Synod, and every time he gave them that title, he pulled off his velvet cap with great respect, saying, among other things... 'Hearken to a word of prophecy, O holy Synod! the older you grow, the more you flourish.'" See Brandt, *The History of the Reformation and Other Ecclesiastical Transactions in and about the Low-Countries* (London: T. Wood, for John Nicks, 1722), 3:230.

- 4 J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell Petter and Galpin, 1899), 3:152.
- 5 Gerard Brandt was sympathetic to the Remonstrant cause. In his third volume, he portrays the synod as biased against and spiteful to the Remonstrants. Nevertheless, the historical data that he provides regarding the meetings of the synod is generally reliable and can be confirmed from other sources.
- 6 Walter Balcanquhall was a delegate to the Synod of Dort from Great Britain, the only delegate representing the Scottish churches. John Hales was Dudley Carleton's chaplain. Hales was not a delegate but could only observe the synod at its open sessions. Both men kept Carleton informed of the proceedings of the synod. Hales's letters are preserved in the *Golden Remains of the Ever Memorable Mr. John Hales of Eton College* (London: Printed for Tim Garthwait, 1659).

foreign delegates.”<sup>7</sup> Even Dutch Reformed men who lived within a century of the synod expressed their reservations.<sup>8</sup> Four hundred years later, should we also judge the synod severely?

A third response to the synod is a nuanced approach. Those who take this approach would commemorate the synod and its work by recognizing its historical significance but would express some degree of embarrassment at Dordt’s theology and would explain its theology as irrelevant for today. Should this be our approach?

Whichever approach we take is determined by our answer to a fundamental question: are the truths that Dordt defended in the Canons of Dordt essential components of the gospel? The totality of the depravity of humans, the irresistible character of God’s grace in the hearts and lives of his elect, the death of Christ on the cross to atone for those whom the Father had given him, and the decree of election and reprobation that governed the death of Christ and what it accomplished—are these the heart of the gospel? Or are they peripheral to the gospel? Or are they neither of these; are they entirely unrelated to the gospel?

If the truths that Dordt defended are entirely unrelated to the gospel, or peripheral matters, or matters of indifference, we may be ambivalent or critical in our evaluation of the synod. If the Canons of Dordt are only one way of expressing the gospel, but the Remonstrant expression is another equally valid way, once again, our response may be ambivalent or critical. However, if these doctrines make up the heart of the gospel—and they do—and if the controversy really concerned sovereign grace—and it did—then we may be neither ambivalent nor critical. Rather, we ought to praise and thank God for what he accomplished at the great synod.

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7 Anthony Milton, “The Hales and Balcanquahall Letters,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 137.

8 Willem J. op ’t Hof, “Ambivalent Assessments of the Synod of Dordt by Dutch Contra-Remonstrants,” in Goudriaan, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 367–96.

It is our firm conviction that the Synod of Dordt defended the true gospel and opposed an erroneous, indeed heretical, form of the gospel. To say nothing of the other points of doctrine in the Canons, this is clear from the issue treated in the second head of the Canons, the death of the Son of God. By his death on the cross Christ completely and efficaciously atoned for the sins of all the elect. This concerns the heart of the gospel!

The Synod of Dordt is worth remembering. Its four hundredth anniversary is an appropriate time for Reformed churches throughout the world to renew their appreciation for the synod. What *men* did at the synod is not what needs emphasizing. But what *God* did through sinful men is praiseworthy. In fact, what God was pleased to accomplish through weak and sinful men is nothing short of amazing.

No single chapter can exhaust the subject of the relevance or significance of the synod for today.<sup>9</sup> This chapter will highlight three ways in which the Synod of Dordt is relevant for today.

### **1. The Synod of Dordt spelled out clearly the boundaries of the Reformed faith.**

For several reasons, the fathers at Dordt understood the need to spell out clearly the boundaries of the Reformed faith. One reason for this is that the Remonstrants taught the wrong view regarding five foundational doctrines pertaining to sovereign grace. Another is that Remonstrant theology was an erroneous theological *system*. Yet these errors were found within Reformed churches, rather than outside Reformed churches. Furthermore, the Remonstrants claimed to be faithful to scripture in their teachings. Promoting their theological system within Reformed churches, they were trying to push the boundaries of Reformed orthodoxy to allow their views.

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9 For other presentations of the significance of Dordt, see Engelsma, *Always Reforming*, 36–41; and DeJong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*.

That the Remonstrants were attempting to extend the boundaries of the Reformed faith had become clear to many delegates at the Synod of Dordt. As evidence of this, note three points. First, for over a decade the Remonstrants had been calling for the national government to convene a national synod in order to revise the Reformed confessions (the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism).<sup>10</sup> Soon after the Belgic Confession was written, some ministers in Reformed churches expressed reservations about some of its teachings. The number of those critical of the Belgic Confession grew in the decades preceding the Synod of Dordt. Rather than leaving the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, thereby acknowledging that their views did not harmonize with the Reformed confessions, these ministers desired to revise the confessions in order to eliminate certain teachings that were objectionable to them. The Remonstrants were trying to extend the boundaries of the Reformed faith.

Second, several months before the synod convened, Festus Hommius, who would be chosen as one of the synod's clerks, wrote a book in which he demonstrated that the Remonstrants opposed Reformed theology.<sup>11</sup> The Remonstrants, Hommius argued, did not merely disagree on the five points of doctrine that would later be embodied in the Canons of Dordt. Rather, Hommius showed, they differed from the teachings of the Belgic Confession on numerous

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10 See "Historical Foreword Addressed to the Reformed Churches of Christ," in Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht*, rev. ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 567–64. See also Arminius' tenth point in his "Declaration of Sentiments," delivered to the national government on October 30, 1608. This can be found in *The Writings of James Arminius, Translated from the Latin in Three Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956), 193–275.

11 Festus Hommius, *Specimen Controversiarum Belgicarum Seu Confessio Ecclesiarum Reformatarum in Belgio*, 1618. As the title indicates, the book is written in Latin. As of January 31, 2019, a PDF version of the book, in Latin, was available at [www.prndl.org](http://www.prndl.org).

points. In fact, they were Socinians theologically. Socinians maintained a wrong view of soteriology, which followed from their denial of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. This view was essentially the view embraced by the Remonstrants, argued Hommius.<sup>12</sup>

Third, that the delegates at the synod realized that the Remonstrants were attempting to extend the boundaries of the Reformed faith is evident from their decision to require the Remonstrants to provide synod in writing with all their objections to any point of doctrine in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The synod required this of them first on December 10, 1618.<sup>13</sup> That synod expected them to do this promptly is evident from its repeated reminders, which came in quick succession, on December 12, 17, and 20. When on December 21 the Remonstrants finally brought some observations regarding the Belgic Confession, the synod rebuked them for not providing their objections to the Heidelberg Catechism. The Remonstrants submitted these finally on December 27. On February 4, 1619, the synod appointed committees to respond to these objections.

In three ways the Synod of Dordt responded to this need to spell out the boundaries of the Reformed faith. First, the synod did review the two Reformed confessions of the Dutch churches, though its motive in doing so was not to appease the Remonstrants. On April

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12 Aza Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dordt on Arminian Anthropology," in Goudriaan, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 81–83.

13 All references to specific decisions of the synod on specific dates at specific sessions can be verified by consulting the Latin critical edition and the Dutch translations of the Acts of the Synod of Dordt. For the Latin critical edition, see Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds., *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619): Vol. 1, Acta of the Synod of Dordt* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 3–189. For the Dutch translation, see *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode te Dordrecht*, J. H. Donner and S. A. Van Den Hoorn, eds. (Utrecht: Den Hertog's Uitgeverij en Boekhandel, n.d.). The English-speaking reader can confer with my summary of the sessions of the Synod of Dordt, found elsewhere in this volume.



30, 1619, at sessions 145 and 146, the delegates declared that they had reviewed the Belgic Confession and found nothing in it that conflicted with scripture. They declared the same of the Heidelberg Catechism at the 148<sup>th</sup> session on May 1. Second, at the 155<sup>th</sup> session (May 13), synod appointed four men to compare the Latin, Dutch, and French translations of the Belgic Confession in order to produce a standard authorized translation. It completed this work at the 173<sup>rd</sup> session on May 24. Third, at its 164<sup>th</sup> session (May 17), synod adopted the Formula of Subscription, requiring officebearers to declare:

We...heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618–‘19, do fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by our public preaching or writing. We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above-mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the Synod of Dordt spelled out clearly that the doctrines contained in the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt were and are the boundaries of the Reformed

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14 Formula of Subscription, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 326. The Formula as used in the PRCA is essentially that which the Synod of Dordt adopted, with one minor change to include the word “elders and deacons.” See “Introduction to the Formula of Subscription” in *Confessions and Church Order*, 324.

faith. The synod viewed the boundaries as fixed and unbending. The teachings of the Remonstrants were outside these boundaries; they contradicted the doctrines set forth in the Reformed confessions.

Reformed churches today must recognize the boundaries that the Reformed churches have previously set, and that Dordt declared to be fixed and unbending. They must love these doctrines and the confessions that contain them and be faithful to them. The way to guard against novelty and heresy is *not* to throw away the confessions and claim to derive our doctrines from scripture alone. Rather, the way in which to safeguard them is to know and love the doctrines embodied in the confessions.

It is urgent that Reformed churches and officebearers take this calling seriously. Those in Reformed churches who begin to teach heretical views generally do not immediately acknowledge that their views do not conform to the Reformed confessional standards, at least not at first. Rather, they claim either that the confessions allow room for their views or that their views are the only proper interpretations of the confessions.

Reformed churches and officebearers ought to also be alarmed at the idea that one's signature on the Formula of Subscription is an expression of agreement *insofar as* the doctrines taught in the confessions accord with scripture. "Insofar as" suggests that one does have reservations regarding some of the doctrines taught in the confessions, and that one considers them not to accord with scripture. The Formula of Subscription requires us to say that these doctrines "do fully agree with the Word of God."

## **2. The Synod of Dordt defended and reinforced the foundation of the Reformed faith.**

The foundation of the Reformed faith is the five points of sovereign grace that Dordt spelled out and defended. To call these the foundation is to acknowledge that the sovereign grace of God toward

sinner, manifested from eternity by electing them to salvation and manifested in time by sending Christ to the death of the cross, as well as by regenerating and sanctifying them, is the bedrock of all biblical and Reformed orthodoxy. To go wrong in regard to these five doctrines will inevitably lead to error regarding many other doctrines as well.

Specific attacks on these foundational doctrines made Dordt's defense and reinforcement of these doctrines both necessary and urgent. Allusion was made earlier to the fact that some pastors in Reformed churches had reservations with regard to some of the doctrines embodied in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism. We will limit ourselves in this chapter to the reservations regarding—really, attacks on—the doctrine of election and the doctrine of man.

Before the Canons were written, the Reformed churches had already stated their doctrine of election in confessional form. They had done so in article 16 of the Belgic Confession, entitled "Eternal Election:"

We believe that, all the posterity of Adam being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest himself such as he is; that is to say, merciful and just: merciful, since he delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom he in his eternal and unchangeable counsel, of mere goodness, hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works; just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Briefly, this article expresses as Reformed creedal teaching that God's decree of predestination is double—election *and* reprobation.

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15 *Confessions and Church Order*, 41–42.

It confesses that God's decree is *personal and specific*—God did not merely choose a category of people, but elected particular persons. And it clearly maintains that election is *unconditional*—“without any respect to their works.”

To this doctrine the Remonstrants objected. Their view, in sum, was that God had decreed to save and bring to heaven all who would believe and obey, and to condemn to everlasting punishment all who would not believe and obey.<sup>16</sup> However, from eternity God did not determine who would believe and obey. Rather, he foresaw who would and who would not believe and obey. Although in words they would not deny that faith and obedience were God's gifts to mankind, the Remonstrants insisted that natural man has the ability to believe and obey, and can choose to do so. Accordingly, God's decree of election is essentially his determination that everyone who would believe, obey, and persevere in faith and obedience to the end, in his own power, would be brought to heaven.

Even before Jacob Arminius publicly taught this, other ministers in Reformed churches were teaching these ideas in seed form. In 1586 the National Synod of The Hague treated the case of Herman Herberts, minister at Gouda, who had reservations with several articles in the Confession and Catechism. He was willing to subscribe to the sixteenth article of the Belgic Confession only as long as it was clear that the article did not teach God to be the author or cause of sin.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the article does not teach that God is the author of sin; but the accusation that it did would be regularly repeated by the Remonstrants.

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16 The essential aspects of the Remonstrant view can be gleaned from the rejection of errors section of the first head of the Canons. As an aside, even though the Remonstrants were wrong, they were not as far down the road theologically as many liberals today. Many liberals today deny that hell exists as a place of everlasting torment, and they teach that in some way Christ's death does save all. The Remonstrants did not teach that; they acknowledged that some were everlastingly punished in hell.

17 Brandt, *History of the Reformation*, 1:405.

In 1591 the Provincial Synod of Zeeland treated the case of Rev. Gisbert Samuels, who had declared to the Classis of Tholen that he did not, and would not, believe the doctrine expressed in article 16. The classis condemned him, as did the provincial synod. However, the synod was willing to restore him to office if he signed the Belgic Confession, including the sixteenth article. This Samuels did, and he served again in pastoral ministry, although controversy dogged him at every step thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

When the Synod of Zeeland treated the case of Samuels, Jacob Arminius had served almost three years as a pastor. He had been ordained in the Reformed Church of Amsterdam in 1588 and had signed the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism in connection with his ordination. Soon after his ordination, his consistory assigned him to refute the teachings of Dick Coornheert, who had been opposing the Reformed doctrine of predestination as early as 1578. As Arminius studied Coornheert's writings, he became convinced of Coornheert's position and found himself unable to refute Coornheert's teachings.<sup>19</sup> From that point on, Arminius became known as the leader of the opposition to the doctrine of predestination embodied in the Belgic Confession. None of Arminius' works were published during his lifetime. However, his views of

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18 Fred van Lieburg, "Gisbertus Samuels, A Reformed Minister Sentenced by the Synod of Zeeland in 1591 for his Opinions on Predestination," in Goudriaan, *Revisiting the Synod of Dort*, 1–22.

19 Exactly when Arminius first realized that he did not agree with the Reformed doctrine of predestination is not clear. Some scholars suggest that Arminius never agreed with it and signed the Belgic Confession with some silent reservations. W. Robert Godfrey's recent reevaluation of this scholarship is convincing. Although it is not possible to say exactly when Arminius changed his mind, evidence can be brought forward to demonstrate that he did do so. See W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019), 191–95. See also A. W. Harrison, *The Beginnings of Arminianism to the Synod of Dort* (London: University of London Press, 1926), 25.

predestination embodied in his “Declaration of Sentiments,” his “Twenty-Five Public Disputations,” and his analysis of Romans 7 and 9 were well known.<sup>20</sup>

Arminius popularized the opposition to the doctrine of predestination contained in article 16 of the Belgic Confession. However, he was certainly not the first to oppose that doctrine. The same can be said of his opposition to the doctrine of humanity as taught in articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession. These articles teach that Adam’s fall into sin corrupted his entire human nature and left him unable to do anything that is truly good. They teach also that this depravity of Adam has been passed from generation to generation, so that the entire human race is infected with it. Consequently, article 14 says, even the will of every human is enslaved to evil and unable to choose what is good.

In his summary of the Remonstrant opposition to the Belgic Confession, Festus Hommius alleged that the Remonstrant doctrine of fallen humanity differed from that of the Reformed in three key areas. First, they denied that the will of fallen humans is a slave to sin and taught instead that the human will is able to will good as well as evil. Second, they asserted that God’s grace works with the human will. The point is not that God’s grace *renews* one’s will, as the Reformed taught. Rather, the Remonstrants taught that the will of fallen humans cooperates with God’s grace, and that God cannot do for humans what humans do not desire or permit God to do. Third, Hommius noted that Simon Episcopius taught that fallen, unregenerated humans can understand the spiritual truths embodied in the Bible apart from the gracious illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

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20 These documents can be found in any complete collection of Arminius’s writings, such as the *Writings of James Arminius*, trans. Nichols and Bagnall.

21 Aza Goudriaan, “The Synod of Dordt on Arminian Anthropology,” in Goudriaan, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 82.

## CONTROVERSY REGARDING SOVEREIGN GRACE

The Remonstrant view of the powers of the will of fallen humans reflected their view of God's justice. God's justice, they taught, leads God to require of humans only that which we are able to do. God would not require of us what we could not do. This is a different view of God's justice than is taught in Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Reformed understanding of divine election and of human depravity, as well as the Reformed understanding of the irresistible grace of God renewing and transforming the will, is part of the foundation of the Reformed faith. The Remonstrants were attacking this foundation. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3).

Dordt's response, then, was significant. It drafted and approved the Canons of Dordt, and particularly the first, third, and fourth heads, which responded to these Remonstrant errors. Thus Dordt defended the foundation of the Reformed faith, without compromise. The doctrines embodied in the Canons are the gospel. The gospel includes much more than is found in the five doctrines of sovereign grace. But the true gospel cannot dismiss these five doctrines; it cannot exist apart from these five doctrines.

That Dordt's response was the decisive response of the Reformed churches is evident from three considerations. First, the Reformed churches adopted the Canons of Dordt as a confessional statement. In connection with this, as already noted, the synod required office-bearers to sign the Formula of Subscription as a statement that one fully agreed with the Reformed teaching. Every decision of an ecclesiastical assembly is settled and binding on the churches that are part of that assembly. However, not every decision of an assembly is raised to confessional status. This decision was.

Second, the synod adopted this response to the Remonstrants with the approval of the international delegates from Reformed

churches in many different parts of the world. Before the Dutch delegates spoke their sentiments regarding the proposed Canons, each international delegation gave its judgment. The foreign delegations were unanimous in their advice that the Dutch delegates adopt the Canons.<sup>22</sup> They did not merely concur with the decision of the Dutch delegates to adopt the Canons; their advice was essentially a recommendation to the Dutch delegations to adopt the Canons.

Third, the decisiveness of Dordt's response is evident from the format of the Canons. This Reformed confession not only stated the true presentation of the doctrines of sovereign grace, but also explicitly rejected the erroneous presentation of the Remonstrants. One cannot claim that the Canons are vague on some points relating to the five doctrines of grace and that subscribing to them gives freedom for varying opinions regarding the doctrines they treat. The Canons are not vague. They are clear both regarding what they teach positively and regarding what they reject.

Today Arminianism holds sway in evangelical circles and in many Reformed churches. In them the Canons of Dordt are forgotten, and the doctrines of the Canons viewed as narrow and overly strict. However, the Reformed faith has not changed, and the gospel of sovereign grace has not changed. Those who profess to be Reformed, who go to churches that share the name Reformed, must know, confess, defend, and promote these doctrines. They are the foundation of the Reformed faith. To destroy the foundation is to destroy not only the Reformed system of theology, but to destroy the gospel itself.

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22 Individual members of some delegations, such as those from Great Britain and Bremen, had some reservations regarding some statements in the Canons, particularly in the second head. However, at the synod each delegation voted as a block, and each had one vote. Each delegation voted to adopt the Canons.



**3. The Synod of Dordt's defense of the Reformed confessional faith was a concrete instance of God's providential governing of all history with a view to preserving the truth.**

A survey of history will demonstrate that God governed the affairs of history so that this synod happened at exactly the right moment. The course of history was such that it seemed that this synod might not be held; or, worse, that it might be held and conclude with a decisive victory for the Remonstrants. But God directed the affairs of history so that the synod was held and was a decisive victory for Reformed orthodoxy.

First, take note of the political history of the time. Philip II became lord of the Netherlands in 1555 and king of Spain in 1556. Spain and the Netherlands were at opposite ends of the religious spectrum. By the time Philip became lord of the Netherlands, many Reformed believers lived there, alongside Roman Catholics and Anabaptists. By contrast, Spain was committed to Roman Catholicism. Trying to destroy the Reformed faith in the Netherlands, Philip sent an army against the provinces. The Dutch defended themselves; the year 1568 marks the beginning of the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Netherlands. During these eighty years the Dutch national government was preoccupied with foreign affairs. However, during this eighty-year time, one truce was declared, the Twelve Years Truce, which was agreed on in 1609, with war scheduled to resume in 1621. During the years of this truce, the synod met.

Turning to the domestic aspect of the political situation, one cannot overestimate the role of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the "Land's Advocate" for the States of Holland from 1586 to 1618. In this position he had helped unite the Dutch provinces and had helped negotiate the truce with Spain. The position was not that of a prime minister, but Oldenbarnevelt soon exercised the authority of a prime minister. Oldenbarnevelt was opposed to calling a national synod as long as he was in power. And he was sympathetic to the Remonstrants.

Second, the economic situation must be considered. The Dutch Golden Age had begun. Dutch merchant ships were sailing to the East and West Indies and establishing Dutch colonies in both Indies as well as at other points along the shipping route. These ships were bringing goods from foreign countries into the Netherlands. The Dutch economy was booming, and the Netherlands was wealthy. The Dutch national government was able to afford the considerable expense of the Synod of Dordt. At the outset, the government budgeted 100,000 guilders; but, as one scholar suggests, “In practice this amount was exceeded by far.”<sup>23</sup>

Because of the wealth of the Netherlands, Spain could not afford to lose the Eighty Years War—a factor in its decision to resume the war after the truce was over. Spain depended heavily on the Dutch economy. And the Netherlands had everything to gain by defeating Spain: the Dutch could afford to prolong the war and desired to be free from religious persecution.

In this intriguing economic and political climate, a theological and church-political controversy was brewing. The theological controversy had begun earlier, even before Jacob Arminius was theological professor at Leiden University, though it intensified during his time there. He was appointed in 1603. Within a year, he and fellow professor Franciscus Gomarus were sparring over the doctrine of predestination. Arminius died in 1609, but his followers continued his opposition to the Reformed creedal understanding of election and reprobation.

Arminius knew his theology was different from that which was spelled out in the Reformed confessions; for this reason, he desired

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23 Fred van Lieburg, *The Synod of Dordrecht 1618–1619*, trans. Dick Swier (Dordrecht: Stichting Historisch Platform Dordrecht, 2017), 19. To put the sum of 100,000 guilders into context, bear in mind that a laborer made 300 guilders a year and a pastor made 500 guilders a year; see <http://www.vanosnabrugge.org/docs/dutchmoney.htm>, accessed May 10, 2019.

a revision of the confessions. At the same time, he knew the best way—humanly speaking—to accomplish this. The Church Order adopted by the National Synod of ’s Gravenhage in 1586 provided not only for annual meetings of provincial synods, but also for a national synod to be held ordinarily every third year. Arminius wanted this provision for a national synod dropped. If there were no national synod, and if Arminius’ views were upheld in a province, his views would hold in that province; there would be no higher court of appeal. Also, Arminius desired the state government to send as many, or more, delegates to each provincial synod as did the churches. When Arminius lived, the state government was sympathetic to him; opposition to Arminius came primarily from those in the churches. But he died, and a national synod would not be held for another decade. When it *was* finally held, it adopted a Church Order that provided for the very opposite of that for which Arminius had hoped.

All these loose ends come together. It was possible for the synod to be held during the years 1609–1621 only because of the Twelve Years Truce with Spain. However, Oldenbarnevelt opposed the idea of a synod and defended the Remonstrants, effectively preventing the synod from being held. Had it been held during Oldenbarnevelt’s tenure, when the national government and some notable provincial governments were sympathetic toward the Remonstrants, the Remonstrants might have been completely exonerated. At the worst, looking at the matter from their viewpoint, they would not have been decisively condemned.

Under the sovereign hand of God, the tide turned quickly. The national government became sympathetic toward the Contra-Remonstrant cause. The national government saw that it was *politically* expedient to call a national synod, because the theological issue was threatening the unity of the United Provinces, and because King James I of England was pressuring the United Provinces to do so.

The national government managed to convene the synod within about one year of calling it—a major feat, considering the fact that international delegates had to be invited and other arrangements be made for what would be the longest and largest synod in Dutch history.

The tide turned when Prince Maurice sided with the Contra-Remonstrants in early 1617. Maurice was the *stadtholder* of the United Provinces. This position had evolved from that of a medieval duke or earl and meant that Maurice was the head of the United Provinces and the one charged with ensuring peace and order. It was a different position than Oldenbarnevelt's, but the nation's wellbeing required both to work together harmoniously. However, they took different sides in the theological issue, which led them to oppose each other politically. Oldenbarnevelt—by now over seventy years old—began losing support from all the provinces except Holland and Utrecht, while Maurice grew in favor. In this political and theological divide, civil violence was common and riots were threatened, and provincial governments lined up on each side.

In this context, in 1617 the national government approved the calling of a national synod. The Province of Holland, sympathetic to Oldenbarnevelt, refused to support this decision and formed civil militias in each town to keep the peace. The other provinces perceived this as a *de facto* declaration of independence from the United Provinces, and Maurice was sent with his army to force Holland's subjection. Some local militias readily laid down their arms when they saw his army coming. Maurice was able to remove local magistrates who favored the Remonstrants, replacing them with Contra-Remonstrant supporters. Maurice's actions sealed the support of all the provinces for the national synod.

The intrigue continued even after the synod had been called. Maurice was instrumental in having Oldenbarnevelt arrested for treason and deposed from political office in August 1618.

Oldenbarnevelt was beheaded the following May, shortly before the synod adjourned.

Two years earlier, it appeared that the national synod would not be held, or, if it were, that it would favor the Remonstrants. The tables had turned. God's providential hand, never idle, was busy directing history to serve his great purpose of preserving the truth. God governed every detail of the history of the United Provinces with a view to this synod. He even directed the lives of everyone who would be a delegate, preparing them for their service. How he did so with respect to certain men makes for interesting stories, but they are beyond the scope of this chapter.

It is striking how long it took the churches to respond to the error of Arminianism. Arminius himself had died in 1609, almost a decade earlier. The churches had been dealing with opposition to the Belgic Confession's teachings for at least three decades. The synod was not held until 1618. The historical factors in this delay have been explained. But what was God's purpose? He who governs history could have governed all events so that the matter was dealt with sooner. Why did he not? While we do not know the mind of God entirely, two answers can be given.

One is that God, in his wisdom, permitted the churches to respond to the Remonstrant error only after that error had matured and developed into an entire theological system, and after its pernicious and destructive character had become evident. Had the church officially and creedally opposed the Remonstrant view of predestination twenty years earlier, other aspects of Remonstrant teaching would have later developed to which the churches would need to respond further. However, when the Synod of Dordt convened, the entire system of Remonstrant teaching could be condemned. That those who taught Remonstrant teachings sincerely meant them and deliberately opposed the confessions had to become apparent to the churches. All this meant that the error had to develop into its mature form.

A benefit of this is that the church today can, on the basis of the Canons of Dordt, condemn Arminianism in every stripe and form. Arminian thinking has developed beyond what the Remonstrants of Dordt's day taught. However, even if the form has changed, the essence of Arminian thinking has not changed. Dordt's condemnation of a mature presentation of Remonstrant teaching allows the churches today to use the Canons of Dordt to oppose present-day forms of Arminianism. The Canons are not outdated; they are relevant.

A second answer is practical and is a lesson that God has taught his church time and again throughout history: he does not deliver us until we see how great our need is and cry out to him for deliverance. Israel in Egypt waited four hundred years but only cried to God for deliverance after her affliction had become great. During the time of the judges in the Old Testament, the church was oppressed by heathen nations for many years, sometimes decades, before she cried to God. When God performs a great deliverance for his church, he often waits for her to understand her great need for it. Understanding this need, and her own inability to deliver herself, the church is the more thankful to God for his deliverance.

So it was with the Synod of Dordt. The heresy would not quietly go away; the churches had to address it. But for their deliverance they had to rely on God and praise him for his victories. The orthodox would be (and were) alarmed by the enemy and would earnestly beseech God to deliver them. This lesson we do well to take to heart as we wait for the appointed hour of God's great deliverance of his church. This last deliverance will come about not by the agency of a national government, nor by an ecclesiastical assembly. It will come about by the return of Jesus Christ. But it will come about after iniquity has developed to the full and in the way of the church's cry to God for deliverance.

Even a right eschatology depends on a right understanding of the gospel of sovereign grace. Until he comes again, the church of Christ

on earth will be continually troubled by heresies and ungodliness. Realizing our great need, we cry often and urgently for him to deliver us. We cry in the confidence that one day, at last, when it seems that the cause of the truth and his church is all but lost, God will turn the course of history to manifest his great purpose: the deliverance of his church from all trouble, sin, heresy, and persecution.

We know he will, for he died effectually to save the elect, and his goal in the salvation of the elect is the praise of God by the church in every age, and in the age to come. The ninth article of the second head of the Canons speaks of this purpose of God in bringing his church to glory:

This purpose, proceeding from everlasting love toward the elect, has from the beginning of the world to this day been powerfully accomplished, and will henceforward still continue to be accomplished, notwithstanding all the ineffectual opposition of the gates of hell, so that the elect in due time may be gathered together into one, and that there never may be wanting a church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ, which may steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as their savior, who as a bridegroom for his bride, laid down his life for them upon the cross, and which may celebrate his praises here and through all eternity.<sup>24</sup>

Many historical events in the history of the church demonstrate that the opposition of the gates of hell will be, in the end, ineffectual. One such event is the Synod of Dordt.

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24 *Confessions and Church Order*, 164.