Synod of Dordrecht 1618-1619

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Introduction

Just imagine the Mayor of Dordrecht receiving a telephone call from The Hague, requesting him to host a European summit. How would he respond? As the boss of a council who likes to speak highly of the reputation of his city, it would be difficult for him to refuse the honour. But as the guardian of public order he would probably break into a sweat. How different it was in 1618, when the city fathers of Dordrecht were charged with organizing a ‘national synod’. It was to be an important church assembly, not only of theologians and politicians from the Netherlands, but also of learned delegates from abroad. A kind of European summit, in Holland’s oldest city at that! The authorities in Dordrecht must have shouted for joy at the news.
Background to the Synod

It was quite a relief in itself that the Synod could actually be held. For many years the country had laboured under a conflict that was threatening to lead to civil war. During a pause in the struggle with Spain for the independence of the Republic (the Twelve-years’ Truce), a quarrel had arisen about the position of the Reformed Church in the new country. It should be realized that, although Calvinism was the official religion of the state, its followers were few and far between, say 20 per cent of the population. The others were Roman Catholic or something else. Some were regular attenders of Reformed worship services, but preferred to put off any decision to become official members of the church.

The authorities were unhappy about this state of affairs. There had only ever been one Christian church. An unfortunate result of the Reformation and the Dutch Revolt against Spain had been a schism and, given this situation, it seemed best for society as a whole to have as little further religious dissension as possible. So the Dutch authorities preferred that the new Calvinistic denomination would develop into a broad national church or volkskerk. This would only be possible if its teachings were not too inflexible and if a friendly admission policy was in place for new members. However, for the Reformed leaders the focus was on doctrinal purity. The church is an institution in itself, they held, which independently sets the bounds of its teachings and confession.

This difference of opinion had constituted a source of tension between the church and the state right from the introduction of Calvinism. To make matters worse, a theological dispute arose at Leyden University, which spread to ministers and parishioners. The parties that formed as a result are known as the rekkelijken (moderates) and the preciezen (precisians or sticklers), the followers of Arminius and Gomarus respectively; the Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants, or, as the man in the street would say on account of their political wings’ actions in the war, bavianen (baboons) and slijkgeuzen (“beggars with muddy boots”). This conflict became a test for the question of whether novel deviations from orthodox doctrine could be tolerated or not.
What was this theological dispute in fact about? And was it a dispute that could have been resolved among insiders? There was no-one in the seventeenth century who did not believe in God or who doubted that one day everybody would be subject to the ‘last judgment’. No ‘once you’re dead, that’s it’; it was ‘eternal glory or punishment’. Which way would this judgment go? This was the question man asked himself, but no one knew. The followers of both Gomarus and Arminius believed that God had, even before the creation of heaven and earth, decided which humans would be on the right side: the doctrine of ‘election’. The other side of the coin was then obviously ‘rejection’ (or, theologically, ‘reprobation’); the miserable destiny of those who would end up in hell. Theologians spoke of ‘double predestination’, the predestination of all in both a positive and a negative sense.

The central question now was: in making this ‘decision to tremble at’ (decetum horribile), had God taken account of the way in which an individual would spend his life on earth? Why, certainly, said the Arminians: on the basis of His eternal foreknowledge, God had separated the good from the wicked. Otherwise nothing would be left of human responsibility here below. No, not really, said the followers of Gomarus: election is a matter of pure grace, even for the worst offender. Election is not an arbitrary decision, but a matter of divine sovereignty. To be elect, there is no need to do anything in particular, but out of sheer gratitude for your conversion you will refrain from doing a lot of bad things anyway. Even though you go on sinning every day, salvation is irrevocable. This is the consolation of Reformed doctrine.

To the average Dutchman in the twenty-first century, this is a very remote discussion. On the other hand, it is not a discussion which easily lends itself to caricatures such as the cruel God of Gomarus or the loving God of Arminius, or to simple schemes of purist Calvinists as opposed to tolerant Remonstrants. The debate is one about fundamental questions regarding man, his origin, existence and destiny: questions which can be dealt with philosophically or equally in a very existential manner. People in the seventeenth century waged this discussion with great intensity, and not only in church, but also at home, in the street and in the pub.
For it was not only your eternal destiny which was at stake, but also that of your husband, your wife and your child. And infant mortality was high in those days...

At the same time, there was something ill-fated in the events leading to the Synod of Dordrecht. A difficult theological problem was forced to extremes because it was becoming entangled with church and political issues. The authorities wanted to force the church to give the Remonstrants some room to expound their views, hoping that this would help peace return. However, as noted already, most ministers insisted on safeguarding the purity of the church and were strongly opposed to any interference from the authorities. They demanded that a national synod be held to pass judgment on the theological disputes. Some provinces of the Netherlands, including the province of Holland, refused to consent, which led to an impasse.

Of course matters were much more complicated than can be described in this context, but we all know from the history books how this impasse ended. There was a breakthrough when Prince Maurice settled matters with his army in 1618, eliminating the amateur revolutionary soldiers (the *waardgelders*), imprisoning his major opponent Oldebarneveldt and appointing new authorities everywhere. This opened the way to organizing the Synod, which was meant to finally lead to the return of peace in the church and in society.
But why Dordrecht?

Why would this synod be held in Dordrecht? Prince Maurice preferred The Hague, close to the High Councils of State. Another possible venue considered was Utrecht, but King James I of England and VI of Scotland (right), who was closely involved in view of international political interests, pointed out that Utrecht was a stronghold of Remonstrants. That is why the Dutch national parliament, the States General, in the end opted for Dordrecht. It is not difficult to work out what the reasons behind this choice were. In addition to its prestigious status as the first city in the province of Holland – where in 1572 the first free meeting of the States had taken place – Dordrecht had traditionally been involved with the public position of the church. In 1574, the first free synod had been held in Dordrecht at a time when only the provinces of Holland and Zeeland had yet joined the rebellion. And in 1578, Dordrecht had been the venue of the first national synod, at a unique moment when all Dutch provinces (including the southern provinces in present-day Belgium) were still united in their struggle against Spanish supremacy. Against this background, there is some logic in having organized this extremely important meeting of 1618 and 1619 in Dordrecht. With hindsight, it would prove to be the only international synod and also the last national synod held during the era of the Dutch Republic. The tradition was not resumed until 1816, in The Hague, where the new king William I resided, who had appointed himself Protector of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Apart from the reputation of Dordrecht as a ‘synodal city’, there was another reason why Dordrecht seemed a suitable venue for this church assembly. Unlike in many other Dutch cities, there was no discord within the Reformed community in Dordrecht. There were a few Arminians, but all the church ministers took the side of Gomarus. And so did the churchgoers. The municipality thus had nothing to fear, such as unrest or riots in the city. On the contrary, the Synod was expected to create...
The interior of the Great Church of Dordrecht, where a service took place by the local pastor Balthasar Lydius, one day before the opening of the Synod in the Kloveniersdoelen.

an economic impulse. And thus Dordrecht could, for a short time, become the stage of an extremely important meeting, one which was to determine the fate of the church and the Republic for almost two centuries to come.

Another problem for the municipality of Dordrecht was finding long-term accommodation for so many guests, ranging from simple country parsons to professors from Germany and England. In haste, some former monastic buildings were converted into guesthouses, but the municipality mainly depended on private citizens who were prepared to make one or more rooms available and to provide board and lodging. In general, the Synod delegates praised the hospitality of the people of Dordrecht, although they had to change lodgings from time to time. The only source of complaints was an occasional grumble by the visiting dignitaries about the city's unhealthy climate. A fair number of theologians fell ill and had to return home early. Some even died in Dordrecht and were buried in the city.

This is how the Synod delegates viewed the Island of Dordrecht as they approached it from across the water (Coloured engraving from 'Civitates Orbis Terrarum' by Braun and Hogenberg, 1593).
A good time

A good time was had, if not by all, then by most gentlemen from the Dutch Republic and abroad during the nearly seven months they spent in Dordrecht. Besides the many hours of heavy theological disquisitions, there was ample opportunity to relax and enjoy oneself. In the Kloveniersdoelen building, for example, one could climb the little tower and enjoy the view of the city and surroundings from a rotating floor with chairs and tables, in a contraption known as the Turnabout (the Draai-om). The delegates with more money to spend held special dinners for friends and relations, parties where the reverend gentlemen imbibed lustily. And finally, there were excursions to other cities, in particular The Hague, because the Synod was a godsend for foreigners keen to get to know this peculiar country of farmers and merchants better. However, the party-goers had to make certain they returned to Dordrecht on time, because the city had strict gate-keepers. Two English guests who rolled up at one o’clock in the morning had to spend the night in their boat by the rampart until the gates were opened again at half past five.

Meanwhile, Dordrecht was a magnet for sensation-seekers and tourists during that long winter. Dordrecht Council, in a surprisingly modern move, had provided for a public gallery next to the conference room in the Kloveniersdoelen. From behind a trellis, anybody who wanted could have a peek into the hall, even during sessions. Old drawings of the Synod were always made from this vantage point: typically, they depict a mixed multitude of men, women and children, sometimes accompanied by a dog. People from all walks of life made use of this gallery, from dignified ladies to working men, in spite of the fact that most of them were unable to follow the deliberations, which were in Latin. From all over the country, people came to Dordrecht to see the goings-on at the Synod with their own eyes. There was even a Danish prophetess, Anna Walcker, wandering around the scene, who buttonholed theologians to regale them with all kinds of revelations from the Holy Spirit she had received, which she had been sent to make known in Dordrecht.
A costly affair

We have already hinted at the positive side-effects of the Synod on the Dordrecht economy. No doubt inn-keepers and shopkeepers did very well during that long winter, as did the printers and booksellers who were commissioned to publish all kinds of pamphlets and tracts. There was another group of professionals in the Dordrecht population which cashed in on the Synod. Since the meeting was organized and paid for by the States General, the necessary funds had to be raised nationally by charging the provinces pro-rata. Holland was the most powerful and prosperous province and thus had to foot the lion’s share of the bill. And where did most of the hard cash come from? From none other than the city of Dordrecht, according to an old usage of the County of Holland. And so it was not only the various categories of merchants in Dordrecht who could hardly suppress a smile when they thought about the Synod spectacle, but the same applied to the city’s minters, who coined the money for the province of Holland.

The Synod of Dordrecht did not come cheap. On the contrary, it was a very costly affair. The delegates were in principle given a per diem, albeit that the amounts differed. The allowances were very generous. The English delegates, who had a decisive voice in the international political game which the Synod in fact was, topped the bill with an allowance of twenty guilders per day. Other foreign guests got a lot less to live on, and the Dutch ministers received yet less: a daily allowance of only four guilders, still more than twice the stipend of an average clergyman at the time. On top of these allowances, there were all kinds of extra perks. According to the budget drawn up on the eve of the Synod, the total bill was expected to amount to a hundred thousand guilders, but in practice this amount was exceeded by far.

An important cause of this huge overspend was the protracted discussions held with the Remonstrants. No wonder they were accused of putting the country to great expense by causing the meetings to drag on and on. One Remonstrant was even reported to have said mockingly that each of the five articles advanced against the Remonstrants would be paid for by a ton of gold. Whether this is true or not, it is a fact that the dramatic removal of the Remonstrants from the Synod meant a certain financial
relief, ‘Ite! Ite!’, Synod President Johannes Bogerman roared at the Remonstrants after they had been quibbling over the procedural niceties of the assembly for six weeks: ‘Out with you!’ After this, the meeting could continue in relative quiet and got down to focusing, on the basis of theological treatises, on the consideration and finally the rejection of the Remonstrant theses.

Dordrecht, too, had to dig deep to pay its share to finance the event. By means of a contribution to the provincial coffers, the city helped to cough up a certain percentage of the astronomical total bill. And the specially-made benches in the Kloveniersdoelen had also cost a pretty penny. Dordrecht was a self-respecting host in other respects, too. After the closure of the Synod, and before the foreigners left, the Municipality laid on a grand farewell party for all delegates in May 1619. More than a hundred guests were served three ‘superb and distinguished dishes’ during this banquet, which cost nearly 1200 guilders. For the amusement of the distinguished politicians, professors and ministers, there was background music. Henderick Speuy, the city organist, and also musicians from nearby cities, performed instrumental pieces. Ladies sang, too, albeit veiled behind curtains so as to ratchet up the national bill a little bit more. As the Remonstrants had it, for whom the grapes were understandably sour, the strict Calvinists needed this meal to dispel their melancholy and remorse after so much injustice done to the condemned ministers and their flock.

The commemorative coin which the city council had struck and presented to all delegates of the Synod.
Lasting effects

Let us return to the serious business. The question is of course whether the National Synod of Dordrecht really justified this impact on the country's finances. A Remonstrant said in a reflective mood afterwards that if the synodal adventure had brought as much peace as it had cost in terms of money, one could be more or less pleased with the outcome, but that perhaps one could wish that this synod could have been prevented by spending the same amount of money. Counter-Remonstrants were of course of a different opinion. Even now, the short-term and long-term consequences of the Synod can be explained from many points of view. Let us restrict ourselves to the most striking results and consequences.

1. The Canons of Dordrecht

In the first place, the Synod of Dordrecht produced a new Reformed confession. Confessions are documents in which the church briefly and clearly sets out what exactly she believes on the basis of the Bible. The Reformed Church recognized from the outset two confessions: the Belgic Confession of 1561 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. To these a
Since 1619, then, the Dutch Reformed Church has known her 'Three Formularies of Unity'. These teachings have always been the basis of the denomination, and until 1795 were even the established foundation of the Dutch state. In the Republican era, the public upholding of these doctrines was seen as a matter of general importance. However, there is also a shadow side to the significance of the Canons of Dordrecht for Dutch Calvinism: a touchstone of orthodoxy, they have also become a source of confusion and a “formulary of disunity”. In the course of the eighteenth century, when the spirit of the Enlightenment broke through into the Reformed Church, there were already many ministers who had problems with the Canons and preferred to ignore them. In 1818 the ecclesiastical establishment even declined to celebrate the bicentenary of the Synod. A minister in Leyden who in spite of this general neglect preached a memorial sermon was even reprimanded. Meanwhile, the Synod of Dordrecht increasingly became the banner of the orthodox wing of the church and of those churchgoers for whom the classical Reformed tradition was sacred and unassailable. Later, from 1834 onwards:

We fight for all the words of Dort
Because they come from God the Lord!

sang the secessionists who had separated from the Reformed Church. The Neo-Calvinist movement initiated by Abraham Kuyper also entirely conformed to the theology and church order of Dordrecht. At present, there are as many as fifteen denominations on our native soil which base themselves on the Canons of Dordrecht. Up until today, books and articles appear addressing such themes as 'the topicality of the Canons of Dort', 'Back to Dort' or 'Dordt Today'.

Canons of Dordrecht

A brief summary of the Five Articles against the Remonstrants — the five theological principles of Reformed doctrine, as set forth extensively in the Canons of Dordrecht: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistable Grace and Perseverance of the Saints. These five principles have become known worldwide as the Five Points of Calvinism (also denoted by the acronym TULIP). The complete Canons of Dordrecht have been translated into many languages. Translations do not always include a historical introduction, and this shortcoming sometimes leads to hilarious misunderstandings. A minister in Peru once said that he had greatly profited from studying the Spanish version of the Canons, but that there was just one thing he had not been able to find out: ‘Just who was this Dordt fellow?’
2. The Church Order of Dordrecht

The Canons of Dordrecht should not be confused with the Church Order (or canon law) of Dordrecht, which was likewise drawn up during the Synod of 1618 and 1619. One could view the confessions — among them the Canons of Dordrecht — as the regulations of the Reformed Church, and the Church Order of Dordrecht as the by-laws. The confession is about matters of substance and identity; the church order addresses practical affairs in daily church life. The Church Order contains, for example, rules about the manner in which ministers, elders and deacons are chosen, the way in which sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are administered, and how congregational discipline is exercised.

While it is true that the Church Order of Dordrecht only dates back to 1619, its contents were in fact established as early as 1571. This happened during the Synod of Emden, where Dutch exiled ministers gathered just over the border that year because the Reformed Church was still proscribed in the Netherlands. The Synod of Emden was to be a prelude to the situation which arose in 1572, when the Calvinists in the Netherlands were able to start building a new church in freedom. The authorities of the various provinces, however, were reluctant to approve the Church Order without further ado. They wanted to have a finger in the pie, for example with regard to the appointment of ministers. It was of major importance to have power to decide who would get permission to address the people from the pulpit!

When the Dutch Reformed ministers gathered again at a national level more than forty years later, in 1618 and 1619, the Church Order of Dordrecht was drawn up in the hope that it would be acceptable to all provinces and thus would lead to a certain measure of national uniformity. This hope once again proved vain, because only a couple of provinces were prepared to introduce the Church Order of Dordrecht. The others kept to their own version, such as the Church Order of Friesland of 1580 and the Church Order of Zeeland of 1591. The differences, yet again, related in particular to the relationship between church and state, and to a lesser extent to internal division of Reformed opinion.

It was not until 1816, when the country had become a monarchy with separation of church and state, that all these provincial rules were replaced by one national church order: the General Rules for the Government of the Reformed Church. Later, these rules became a stumbling block for orthodox church members, one which, amongst other factors, led to the Secession of 1834 and another separation, the Doleantie (the ‘Sorrowful Schism’ under Abraham Kuyper), in 1886. Various groups which in the course of time seceded from the Reformed Church reverted to the old Church Order of Dordrecht as a symbol of what they saw as the ideal situation prior to 1816. Until the present day, it constitutes the rule of order for several smaller denominations of Reformed confession, just as the Canons provide the rule of faith.
3. The Authorised Bible version

Finally, we should mention a fairly universal legacy of the Synod of Dordrecht, albeit a somewhat indirect one, namely the decision to translate the Bible afresh from the original languages. Until that time, there were only poor translations made from the Latin Vulgate and the German Lutheran Bible. At last, the Bible would be given a scholarly Dutch translation directly from the languages in which it had been written, Hebrew and Greek, including the addition of copious marginal notes.

Finally, in 1637, the *Statenbijbel* or States’ Bible (so named due to the political approval of its commissioning at the Synod) was ready for publication and could be introduced throughout the Netherlands for use in church, at schools and in families. The influence of this classic translation of the Bible on language development, and also on Dutch literature and culture, has been immense. For four centuries, this Bible has been a daily source of spiritual inspiration for many Dutchmen. Nowadays, many other translations have been put into circulation, and in late 2004 most Dutch denominations accepted a totally new Bible translation. All the same, the *Statenbijbel* is and will always be a historic monument in itself for both religious and non-religious Dutchmen.

The Dutch Statenbijbel, like its contemporary the Authorised (King James) Version in English, has had a major influence on vocabulary. Novel words were added to the language, others kept from dying out or even brought back to life. There is a large number of sayings, expressions or proverbs which clearly find their origin in the Statenbijbel of 1637. Here are just ten examples, most of which are the equivalents of English Biblical idioms:

- to steal one’s heart - 2 Samuel 15:6
- to move heaven and earth - Isaiah 13:13
- to waver between two opinions - 1 Kings 18:21
- whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein - Proverbs 26:27
- to hang one’s harps upon the willows - Psalm 137:2
- to put a knife to one’s throat - Proverbs 23:2
- to couch down between two burdens - Genesis 49:14
- to plough upon rocks - Amos 8:12
- to separate the sheep from the goats - Mattheus 25:32
- to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind - Hosea 8:7
A tangible inheritance

All this heritage is worth being kept alive, especially in a city like Dordrecht. Honouring this past need not remain limited to a couple of churches in the city holding their Reformation Day service each year. And there is no reason why the stories should only be told to the children of Johannes Bogerman and Johannes Polyander, the city’s two orthodox-Reformed primary schools. The city council and cultural organisations are increasingly aware of this heritage, far more than they used to be. A low ebb of historical awareness in the city was of course the demolition in 1859, for reasons of economy, of the dilapidated Kloveniersdoelen, the building where the Synod held its meetings. A citizen of Dordrecht wrote this poem at the time:

A last farewell to this rubble which lies here before your eyes!
Posterity will before long tell her children:
Here was once the seat of the Church of God.

Few would echo to the full the sense of grief expressed in this poem, but it is a waste that this building, which could have been turned into a beautiful museum, no longer exists. The building that was erected in its place, the District Court on Steegoversloot Street, has meanwhile already been protected by listed building status! Fortunately, the Great Church contains a beautiful model of the old Kloveniersdoelen building, made by the artist Herman van Duinen and his pupils, complete with the synodal conference chamber and puppets of the delegates, supplemented with a small exhibition.

There is also a national political party represented in the City of Dordrecht which has included the complete Canons of Dordrecht in its regulations. Dordrecht’s history museum - Hof van Nederland - which was opened in 2015, now presents a permanent exhibition on the Synod of Dordrecht. It will be interesting to see what the next centenary in Dordrecht in 2018 and 2019 will bring the Calvinist pilgrims, and indeed what it will mean for everybody who has a cultural interest in this historical event.
## Synod of Dordrecht: some key dates

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td>13 November 1618:</td>
<td>Synod opened</td>
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<td>19-27 November 1618:</td>
<td>Resolution to commission a new Bible translation</td>
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<td>6 December 1618:</td>
<td>The Remonstrant party is received</td>
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<td>14 January 1619:</td>
<td>The Remonstrants are dismissed</td>
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<td>6 May 1619:</td>
<td>The Canons of Dordrecht are announced</td>
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<td>9 May 1619:</td>
<td>Foreign observers depart</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 May 1619:</td>
<td>The Church Order of Dordrecht is discussed</td>
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<td>29 May 1619:</td>
<td>Synod closed</td>
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The Kloveniersdoelen before the demolition in 1859