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Four Centuries Ago: An Historical Survey of the Synod of Dort¹

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Introduction

The year 2019 marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the successful conclusion of one of the most significant – and arguably one of the most overlooked – ecclesiastical assemblies in Church History. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) and the canons it produced have been both praised and denounced by historians and theologians for the past 400 years. Generally speaking, these widely different opinions have represented the winning and losing side of the great Calvinist-Arminian dispute, which the Synod sought to resolve. English Puritan Richard Baxter’s oft-cited opinion is representative of the victors at Dort: writing in 1656, he concluded, “The Christian World since the days of the Apostles has never seen a Synod of more excellent Divines than ... [the Westminster Assembly] *and the Synod of Dort.*”² Nineteenth-century American liberal theologian Charles Briggs represents a very different appraisal of Dort and its divines: “The scholastic theologians of ... Holland perverted [the] precious doctrinal achievements of Calvinism into hard, stern, and barren dogmas ... They divided the Calvinistic camp into two parties, scholastic Calvinists and moderate Calvinists.”³ But a close examination of the synod’s history and its canons reveals that this was not an unnecessary dispute over words between allegedly “moderate” and “stricter” Calvinists. While there were nuances of opinion at this as in every assembly of Christ’s Church, the Synod of Dort was a field of battle between two very different understandings of the Gospel. As such, it was a debate worth having, and because it is a debate that is very much alive in Christendom, this is a Synod still worth listening to. This essay contextualizes the subsequent studies of the Canons of Dort by offering a brief historical introduction.

Reformation and Politics in the Infant Dutch Republic

We begin with the Reformation in the Netherlands and the emergence of the Dutch Republic. When the Reformation first came to the Dutch, the patchwork of provinces with their princes and nobles were under the dominion of the Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V – the same Charles who presided at Luther’s defense at the Diet of Worms in 1517. Lutheran and Anabaptist teachings made some inroads in the Low Countries the decade after the Emperor’s ban on the Reformer, but it was the Calvinist branch of the Reformation that took root from the

¹ This essay is an expansion of the paper delivered at the Westminster Conference, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh PA, on September 13, 2019.

² Cited in Michael Dewar, “The British Delegation at the Synod of Dort: Assembling and Assembled; Returning and Returned,” *The Churchman* 106, no. 2 (1992), 133. Italics mine.

³ C.A. Briggs, cited in Herbert Darling Foster, “Liberal Calvinism: The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 16, no. 1 (1923): 37.

1540s, especially in the southern provinces (today's Belgium), where secret congregations and synods assembled and the Belgic Confession would become its first formal statement of faith.

Unlike other European "Reformations," the Dutch Reformation had no obvious figurehead – no Luther, Calvin or Knox – but developed organically as a grass-roots movement in the provinces at a time of increasing political tension with their Spanish overlords. It was not long before the new churches endured ferocious religious persecution at the hands of the Inquisition, with many martyrs under Charles and his even more ardent successor, Philip II, in subsequent decades. But this political and religious overreach only earned for the Spanish monarchs the revolt of their Dutch subjects in the 1560s under the leadership of their princes, led by William of Orange. Attempts to suppress the Dutch rebels by the notorious Duke of Alva and his "Council of Blood" ultimately failed, and after years of conflict, the seven northernmost provinces joined in the Union of Utrecht in 1579, declaring their independence in 1581.⁴

The new Dutch Republic declared its national Church to be Reformed, and the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism became its subordinate standards. Reformed theology faculties were quickly opened at the universities of Utrecht, Leiden, Franeker, and Gröningen to train men for the ministry. It is important to note that right from the birth of this new Reformed republic, behind this apparent co-operation between church and state, there were, in fact, deep tensions between them. The war had been fought for both civil and religious liberties, and to be a patriot was to be a Protestant. But many party politicians in the new republic's "parliament," the States-General, was nervous about the power of a fully independent national church. It maintained control by funding her out of the government's purse, ensuring that state representatives attended her assemblies, and frequently played a role in "hirings and firings" from the clerical office. State control was made plain at the Synod of the Hague in 1568 when the church declared her independence, and the States-General responded promptly by refusing permission for a national synod. The Church may have been Calvinist, Presbyterian, and had an educated clergy and liberty to worship. But she was also subject to the vagaries of powerful Erastian politicians in the States-General, led by the Dutch patriot, Johan van Oldenbarneveld. For half a century, she had no national synod: from 1568 until the States-General were finally compelled to summon one, at the city of Dordrecht (or Dort) in 1618. The catalyst for doing so was a high-stakes theological debate that threatened the very survival of the young nation: the Remonstrant Controversy.

The Remonstrant Controversy (1610-18)

During this fifty-year hiatus, growing theological and political polarization within the new republic risked its dissolution. On the one hand were the consistent confessional Calvinists: men like Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), professor of theology at Leiden; Sibrandus Lubbertus (1555-1625), professor of theology at Franeker; Gijsbertus Voetius (1559-1676), student of Gomarus and eventually the famous theology professor at Utrecht. These men studied at the top institutions of Europe – Oxford, Cambridge, Heidelberg, and Geneva under Calvinist divines like William Ames, Zachary Ursinus, and Theodore Bèza. As the historiography of Dort has usually characterized the Dutch Calvinists as cold, heartless scholastics in ivory towers, it is important to note here that often overlooked fact – they were also celebrated in their days as caring pastors of local congregations, renowned for their piety.⁵

⁴ Peter Y. De Jong, "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*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 1–14.

⁵ Simon Kistemaker, "Leading Figures at the Synod of Dort," in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 39–51.

On the other hand, there were the theological moderates. These were men like Simon Episcopius (1583-1643), who succeeded Gomarus as a professor at Leiden; Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), a witty court preacher for Maurice, Prince of Orange; Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the renowned humanist scholar. Like their counterparts, these scholars also studied in some of the great Calvinist institutions of the day, but aligned themselves with powerful Erastian politicians like Oldenbarneveld, preached “liberty of conscience” as a key tenet of the Reformation in opposition to a strict confessional subscription, and a broad-minded humanism in the spirit of Erasmus of Rotterdam.⁶ It is no surprise that subsequent historiography has type-casted these men as the “broad-minded liberals” whose progressive pre-Enlightenment views were persecuted by the backward Calvinist scholastics.⁷ But if their names are increasingly unknown four centuries on, it is largely because they have been overshadowed by, and their theology subsumed under that of the most influential theologian in their circle: Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)

Jacobus Arminius (a Latinized form of James Harmenszoon) was raised within the Calvinist mainstream, and an incredibly bright student at Leiden, where Erastian and humanist theories were gaining currency.⁸ He won a scholarship from the City of Amsterdam to study at Geneva under Calvin’s son-in-law, Theodore B  za. Here he quietly took exception to a number of points of doctrine but graduated with the commendation of B  za himself.⁹ Upon his return in 1587, he was appointed pastor of a church in Amsterdam. Here, despite a good reputation as a pastor, he began to draw attention for divergent teaching from the Belgic Confession, culminating in a controversial series of lectures on the Book of Romans. He publicly argued against the Confession’s view of human depravity, the human will, and divine predestination, contending that God gave “prevenient grace” to all mankind, whereby even fallen man could freely repent and believe.¹⁰

⁶ Louis Praamsma, “The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618),” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 22–27.

⁷ Hugh Trevor-Roper is characteristic of this school: “At the Synod of Dordt, a strict, repressive Calvinism was imposed on the Church of the United Provinces. However, the tyranny of the orthodox was not permanent ... the new philosophy was preserved and continued by Arminian patronage. From Arminius and Grotius, the spiritual and the secular disciples of Erasmus, the line of descent leads, through Episcopius, Limborch and Leclerc, unmistakably to the Enlightenment.” Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 191. See also Foster, “Liberal Calvinism: The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618.”

⁸ William Van Doodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic,” *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 28 (2007): 140–65.

⁹ Samuel Miller’s narrative relates that Arminius “was constrained to withdraw from that institution,” for gathering other theological malcontents to private lectures where he quietly undermined his professors. This is certainly consistent with his later activities, but Miller may be mistaken in assuming the Acad  mie’s authorities were fully conscious of this “cave of Adullam.” Samuel Miller, “Introductory Essay” to Thomas Scott, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1856), 7; cf. Van Doodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic”, 144-5.

¹⁰ God’s foreknowledge was thus downgraded to a Molinist “middle knowledge.” See Eef Dekker, “Was Arminius a Molinist?,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, no. 2 (1996): 337.

None of this prevented his being appointed a professor of theology at Leiden in 1603, along with Franciscus Gomarus, after the death of the famous Franciscus Junius. Strong protests were made over this appointment, but they were unable to silence his powerful patrons, including Uytenbogaert, who now enjoyed the favor of the court at the Hague. Despite public assurances not to teach contrary to the Confession, it soon became clear that he was doing precisely that,¹¹ and even the most charitable assessments that praise his undoubted academic brilliance and apparent outward piety find it difficult not to lay a charge of duplicity at his feet. Gradually, much of the student body began to be infected with his teaching, and factions in the institution began to align intellectually with the free-thinking Arminius on one side and the confessionally-committed Gomarus on the other. Nor was this limited to within the academy. The rift began to spread throughout the Reformed Church in the United Provinces: differing soteriologies necessitated diverging ecclesiologies. Arminius and his supporters argued for latitude in the Church's Confession to incorporate his erroneous theology.¹² Gomarus and the Reformed majority retained the historic practice of a national confessional church with creedal boundary markers of orthodoxy.

It is worth underlining this point. As is so often the case in Church History, when heterodoxy cannot persuade the church of its respectability, it insists that the church's confessional boundaries of orthodoxy must be stretched to accommodate it. Either creedal language must be reinterpreted to create a "bigger tent" that will accommodate the novel teaching, or else entirely new creedal forms are demanded in order to render heterodoxy the "new orthodoxy." Arminius began by attempting the former, protesting that his teaching was within the bounds of the Belgic Confession. But the Reformed majority held to a very different view of confessional subscription and would not be moved. And so, when finally summoned to the States-General in 1608, Arminius adopted the latter approach, calling for a rewriting of the confessional standards of the Dutch church. When he died suddenly in 1609, he left the national Church in great turmoil, and his followers, led by his natural successor Uytenbogaert, took the battle to a new level by producing that fateful document in 1610 called the Remonstrance.

The Remonstrance (1610)

The Remonstrance defended their party from charges of heresy by summarizing five points of doctrine taught by Arminius, insisting that they be allowed "liberty of conscience" to believe these doctrines. To summarize, it contended that election is based on foreseen faith; Christ's atonement is universal, not limited to the elect; man's depravity is partial and his will free; the grace of God is resistible, and that there is a possibility that man might fall from grace.¹³ Later attempts to distance Arminius himself from the five points of his followers have proved unconvincing; the wording of the document clearly mirrors Arminius' own extant writings. While it is true that some of the Remonstrants exceeded the moderate measure of their teacher's Pelagianism and continued on the high road to Socinianism, it is surely no rehabilitation of Arminius to concede that he had shown them the way!¹⁴

¹¹ Miller gives a sobering account of how error in a seminary faculty spreads to the student body and thence to the pulpits of the land. Miller, "Introductory Essay", 8-14.

¹² Indeed, recent historiography continues to protest Arminius' orthodoxy, arguing that he should be reckoned as under the umbrella of European Calvinism. See Foster, "Liberal Calvinism: The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618."

¹³ Perseverance was left an open question by the *original* Remonstrance, by the time of the Synod of Dort it was altered to a firm denial.

¹⁴ See Miller, "Introductory Essay", 15-6.

These opinions were not, of course, “a new thing under the sun.” Our native semi-Pelagian urge to accept some degree of contribution to our redemption has ensured that the church has regularly had to address it.¹⁵ But Arminius and his followers mark the first major systematization of the semi-Pelagian error within the Protestant Churches, and a challenge that had to be decisively and formally addressed in creedal form. Of course, the Remonstrant Party also hoped that these innovations in soteriology would achieve creedal status, and they sought to achieve it by innovations in ecclesiology. They were, to a man, Erastians: publishing tracts that urged powerful political allies like Oldenbarneveld to prevail in the concurrent political conflict, to take control of the church by appointing moderate clergy, to silence controversial preaching, and thereby grant Arminianism a place at the table of confessional orthodoxy.¹⁶ They also had powerful allies in the University of Leiden: Gomarus was replaced on the faculty by Simon Episcopius and Arminius’ controversial successor on the faculty was the notorious Conrad Vorstius, whose Arminianism pushed in the direction of Socinianism, drawing the attention and polemical ire of none other than King James I of England.

Summoning of the Synod

The years 1610-17 brought a ferocious pamphlet war that drew in concerned Protestant theologians from neighboring states like England, France, and the Reformed German and Swiss provinces. There were a number of unsuccessful attempts to reconcile the two sides. In the spring of 1611, the States-General called a conference at the Hague, where the Calvinist delegates produced a doctrinal response called the “Counter-Remonstrance” – and with it, an appeal that a national synod be called to finally settle the debate. But as long as they had powerful political allies in the province of Holland, the Remonstrants knew the States-General would continue to overrule any such Synod, which they knew would certainly rule against them. The political pendulum finally swung decisively in favor of the Calvinists when Maurice, the Prince of Orange, finally severed his ties with Oldenbarneveld and threw his political and military clout behind the Calvinist majority. With the other provinces calling for a national synod, Holland still held out, passing a resolution to prevent a synod, to silence her Calvinist ministers and raise an army in defense of the Remonstrants.¹⁷ With tensions running high and rioting in several cities, Maurice’s troops were compelled to enter Holland and restore order to prevent civil war. On the orders of the States-General, the Remonstrants’ political leaders Oldenbarneveld and Grotius were arrested and imprisoned,¹⁸ and without any further obstruction to the wishes of the majority of the people, a National Synod summoned to meet at Dordrecht by a 4-3 vote.

So, like the Westminster Assembly, the Synod of Dort, which affirmed the independence of a national Church from political interference, was itself summoned by a government decree. And as was so often the case in the early modern period, it was summoned by leaders arguably more versed in the art of politics than polemics. Prince Maurice famously quipped that he “didn’t

¹⁵ For examples, see Samuel Miller’s “Introductory Essay” to Thomas Scott, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1856), 5-6, and Praamsma, “The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618),” 22-7.

¹⁶ For representative examples, see Uytenbogaert’s tract of 1610, *Tract on the Office and Authority of Higher Christian Government in Ecclesiastical Affairs* and Grotius’ *Resolution for Peace in the Church* (1614), which would be achieved by the magistrate’s gagging ministers from preaching on controversial subjects.

¹⁷ This was effected by Oldenbarneveld’s “Sharp Resolution” of 1617.

¹⁸ The former was executed in 1619 and Grotius sentenced to life imprisonment, escaping in 1621 to France, where most of his works were later composed.

know if predestination was blue or green,” but as one historian has observed, “even if he did not know its color, he decided to make it orange.”¹⁹

1. The Composition and Work of the Synod (1618-19)

Counter-Remonstrants and Remonstrants

The synod was composed in Presbyterian manner, with provincial synods sending their delegates. Each swore the following oath: “I promise before God, in whom I believe, and whom I worship, as being present in this place, and as being the Searcher of hearts, that during the course of the proceedings of this Synod, which will examine and decide, not only the five points, and all the differences resulting from them, but also any other doctrine, I will use no human writing, but only the Word of God, which is an infallible rule of faith. And during all these discussions, I will only aim at the glory of God, the peace of the Church, and especially the preservation of the purity of doctrine. So help me, my Saviour, Jesus Christ! I beseech him to help me by his Holy Spirit!”²⁰

Having already lost the political battle, the Remonstrant delegates were called, not to another theological conference like that in the Hague in 1611 – a round table discussion of theological opinions. Rather, they were being summoned to the highest court of the national church so their errors might be examined, and a formal, ecclesiastically-binding response made.²¹

The Remonstrant delegation, led by Simon Episcopius, consequently attempted to derail the proceedings by various stalling tactics, not even showing up until the 22nd session! Their demand to publicly refute the doctrine of the Confession on the floor was refused: it was their novel teaching the synod had gathered to judge, and not the established confessional standards of the church. Refusing to submit to the synod’s pleas to abide by synodical procedures, they were finally dismissed by the moderator, Johannes Bogerman, in contempt of court, and the synod was forced to judge their writings in their absence. Now, this has often been seen as an injustice, but the Synod was concerned with impartiality, showed great longsuffering towards the stubborn Remonstrant delegation, and its mandate from the States-General included this remarkably significant proviso: “foreign Reformed theologians ... [are] to be invited to insure a fair and catholic decision on the issues in question.”²²

¹⁹ Anthony Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), xvii.

²⁰ Cited by Fred H. Klooster, “Doctrinal Deliverances at Dort,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 57.

²¹ As Anthony Milton explains, “The Synod of Dort was assembled essentially in order to *conclude* a political crisis which had threatened to destroy the country ... its task was not to *resolve* a crisis, but rather to set the seal on a hard-won and critical political victory.” Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, xxxix-xl. Italics original.

²² Cited in Van Doodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic,” 155. Italics mine.

International delegates

Here the Synod of Dort stands out as the first (and only) truly ecumenical Reformed synod. Delegations of theologians were sent from the Church of England,²³ the Reformed Churches of the Palatinate, Switzerland, the republics of Geneva, Emden and Bremen, and the Huguenot churches of France; (the latter were not permitted to attend by the French King, but maintained a close correspondence throughout the proceedings).

Each delegation – both domestic and international – functioned as independent committees, studying each point of the Arminian Remonstrance, bringing their conclusions to the floor for discussion, and then the whole was crafted into Canons that responded to the Five Points of the Remonstrance. In total, the Synod held 153 formal sessions (not including many committees working behind the scenes), and took seven months to complete its work (November 1618 to May 1619).

This paper will not be addressing the content of the Canons the Synod produced, because there are *five more papers* devoted to it! Suffice to say, the four canons have five heads that correspond to the five points of the Arminian Remonstrance as follows:²⁴

- a. Unconditional election and faith are God’s gift of grace.
- b. Christ’s death is sufficient to atone for the sins of the world, but its efficacy is limited to the elect.
- c. All mankind is so depraved by nature that they cannot effect their own salvation.
- d. God’s saving grace is sovereign and irresistible.
- e. The elect will persevere in salvation until the end.

²³ The English Delegation is of particular interest. King James I was himself a theologian of some competence, who had engaged in a ferocious skirmish with Vorstius. He sent a delegation of English divines to defend the Counter-Remonstrant cause and help establish an outcome positive to British interests. They were as much political envoys sent from the King (and received by the Estates-general rather than the synod). In view of this, James is sometimes reckoned to be a champion of Calvinism. But that would be a mistake. Setting aside the ungodly drama of his personal life, James had an able analytical mind and intellectually appears to have favored a Reformed soteriology. But it was political and not just theological interests that motivated his weighing in on the side of Prince Maurice, the Estates-General and the Counter-Remonstrants. James was certainly no friend of the representative “Presbyterian” polity of the vast majority of the delegates. It’s surely ironic that the synod began just a few weeks after his Scottish Privy Council had ratified the *Five Articles of Perth*, which compelled the increasingly bishop-filled Calvinistic Church of Scotland to accept the king’s innovations in worship, most significantly, bowing at the Lord’s Table. Alan R MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk, 1567-1625: Sovereignty, Polity, and Liturgy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 162-4. The Privy Council ratified the Articles (which had been passed in a “stacked” General Assembly in August) in October, a few weeks before the first session at Dort. It has been suggested that this may account for the King’s avoidance of sending any clergy from the Church of Scotland to Dort, lest they draw undue attention to his unpopular liturgy there. An effort by Scottish Presbyterian polemicist David Calderwood to draw the Dutch attention to this by his dedication of *De Regimine Ecclesiae Scoticae* (1620) to the Synod. The synod had, however, a narrowly defined agenda and did not address such matters of polity. See Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

²⁴ The third and fourth points were combined because they were considered inseparable.

The Canons of Dort may be more limited in doctrinal scope than some of the other great Reformed Confessions, but it must be remembered that the synod's agenda was driven by the Remonstrants' five points of contention. But they proclaim with great clarity the heart of the Gospel! As one writer has summarized them, "The subject matter of the canons is sovereign grace *conceived*, sovereign grace *merited*, sovereign grace *needed* and *applied*, and sovereign grace *preserved*."²⁵

Other tasks

It is worth mentioning in passing that a few other issues *were* addressed by the synod – after all, it had been fifty years since a national synod had been called! By far, the most significant of these was the agreement to set to work on a new translation of the Bible, similar to what had happened in England in 1611. This became the *Staten Bijbel*, which was finally published in 1637, and played a massive role in the development of the Dutch church, language, and culture.

It had always been one of the visions of the Reformed to see a pan-European Protestant alliance arrayed against the Roman Antichrist. The Christian princes of Christian nations would send representatives of their national churches to sit in councils. As Anthony Milton writes, "It was this vision of a supranational true church of Protestantism arrayed against the forces of Rome that ... provided the crucial ideological framework for the official and unofficial interactions of the British delegates with their continental counterparts."²⁶ As we shall see, aspiration and realization were two very different things. The beguiling notion of an international Reformed ecumenical synod defeating common theological enemies and handing down its binding canons to its respective national churches was not accomplished in such a clear-cut way, but as we shall see, it was not without significant and enduring effects on the nations that attended.

2. Aftermath of the Synod

Immediate and local results

The Canons were, according to their title page, "The judgment concerning divine predestination which the synod declares to be in agreement with the Word of God."²⁷ They are "unique because of their role as a *judicial decision* in the Arminian Controversy."²⁸ As such, they joined the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism to now become "*Three Forms of Unity*" to bind the Dutch Reformed churches together, and they *still* bind together the churches of the Dutch

²⁵ Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), xi.

²⁶ Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, lv.

²⁷ Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 2011), 22.

²⁸ Beeke and Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, xi.

Reformed tradition wherever they scattered in the years of the Golden Age of the Dutch Empire that followed.²⁹

Politically, the synod also marks the triumph of the House of Orange over the Remonstrant party in the States-General, who had caused such political strife for the better part of a decade. Its leader, Oldenbarneveld was sentenced to death, Grotius fled to France, and while several Arminian clergy conformed, over a hundred were now judged to be outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy, and were excommunicated and removed from their charges, several leaving the country.

Long-term and International results

But the synod's influence was felt well beyond its immediate Dutch constituency.³⁰ The synod's canons supplied a theological benchmark for international Calvinism, and key political and theological alliances were cemented. The synod presented a vision of an International Reformed *ecumene*, which later political theorists like Althusius and Rutherford would build upon. This paper will consider just two examples.

The Synod's Influence in England

The English delegates went home in triumph and were promptly promoted by the king. In 1620, the secretary of the Synod, Francis Hommius, was in London to present to the King, Prince Charles and the Archbishop of Canterbury with beautifully bound copies of the Acta of the synod, containing an account of the synodical sessions and of course its *Canons* – “A symbolic affirmation of the English church's links with the continent.”³¹ But despite this gesture and the significant role played by English divines at the synod, for the next two decades, England would be embroiled in an Arminian controversy of its own, with the rise of Arminian bishops like Richard Montagu and William Laud.³² This led to the English delegates at Dort defending the synod from its detractors for the next two decades and a futile attempt by their leader, George Carleton, to urge the formal ratification of the Canons by convocation in 1624.³³ Nevertheless,

²⁹ The Synod also marks the threshold of what has come to be known as “The Golden Age of the Dutch Republic” – much of the 17th century saw the Netherlands become a powerful international force in trade, the arts, and religion. The Orange Party was more eager for colonial expansion, and the West India Company was formed two years after the close of the synod, joining the Dutch West India Company in exporting not only traders, but the Dutch Reformed faith to far-flung corners of the globe. See William Van Doodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic,” *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 28 (2007): 140-1; Peter Y. De Jong, “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*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 1; Howard G. Hageman, “The Synod of Dort and American Beginnings,” *Reformed Review* 38, no. 2 (January 1, 1985): 107-8.

³⁰ Anthony Milton correctly asserts that, “There was certainly no suggestion at the Synod of Dort, which was in theory a *national* synod of the Dutch Church, that the canons should be binding on other Reformed Churches, even if it was important that all delegations be seen to approve them.” Anthony Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), l. Italics original.

³¹ *Ibid.*, liii.

³² For a full account, see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c.1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

³³ Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, l.

despite the Anglican non-adoption of Dort,³⁴ all five delegates had joined the others and signed the Canons before returning home, which was interpreted by Calvinist champions like the Puritan John Preston as a tacit admission that Calvinism was the established doctrine of the Church of England.³⁵ Certainly, the Westminster Confession echoed the Canons on the great issues it addressed, and John Murray can write of Westminster's "indebtedness" to Dort, revealing a great "consensus of Reformed Theology."³⁶

The Synod's Influence in Scotland

Even though there was no direct representation from the Church of Scotland at Dort, though Walter Balcanquhall was a Scot, he was representing the Church of England,³⁷ it was frequently referred to as a benchmark of Reformed orthodoxy in Scotland for the rest of the century.

Not infrequently, the decisions of Dort were considered by the Kirk as "not merely as valid but as binding."³⁸ The Canons of Dort are frequently appealed to in the anti-Arminian writings of the likes of Rutherford and Baillie. But the great Second Reformation General Assembly at Glasgow in 1638 – two decades after Dort – provides one of the most striking examples of how Dort was esteemed in its pan-European Reformed context. When the king's Scottish bishops were put on trial, the Canons of Dort were explicitly used as a test of orthodoxy; a refusal to sign them meant ejection from their charges.³⁹ But it wasn't just the *content* of Dort's canons that the Assembly received as in some sense binding, albeit not in any formal sense of subscription by the Kirk, her *procedure* was accepted by the Covenanters as *precedent-setting* too.⁴⁰

The Synod was effectively "a Protestant Ecumenical Council."⁴¹ But while the Canons of Dort became one of the creedal formulations of the *continental* Reformed tradition, they did not retain quite that status in the *British* Reformed Churches despite efforts of many in the Puritan

³⁴ Much to the appreciation of subsequent generations of historians; see e.g. Frederick Calder, *The Memoirs of Simon Episcopius* (New York: J. Collard, 1837), 449-50.

³⁵ Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 144-8.

³⁶ John Murray, "Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster on Predestination – A Comparative Study", in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:207, 215. Others have questioned the degree of concurrence of the divines themselves; see e.g. Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1837), 2:429-30.

³⁷ G. D. Henderson, "Scotland and the Synod of Dort," *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 24 (1931): 5-10. Balcanquhall later proved himself to be no friend of the Scottish Presbyterian establishment, defending his role at Dort against the alleged irregularities of the General Assembly of 1638, and ghost-writing King Charles I's retort to the Covenanter movement in 1639. Charles I, *A Large Declaration Concerning the Late Tumults in Scotland* (London: Robert Young, 1639).

³⁸ Henderson, "Scotland and the Synod of Dort," 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-6.

⁴⁰ Baillie tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to follow Dort's deliberative procedures. When several bishops boycotted the Assembly, refusing to recognize its authority, it raised the question of the lawfulness of proceeding to charge men in their absence. This was answered by the moderator Alexander Henderson with an appeal to (that's right) the precedent set at Dort, when the Remonstrants had likewise walked out, but did not nullify the synod's proceedings. *Ibid.*, 9. Henderson shrewdly read out the English Dortian delegation's arguments for the legitimacy of this action. See *ibid.* for Dortian veteran Balcanquhall's reply.

⁴¹ Henderson, "Scotland and the Synod of Dort", 11.

wing of the national churches of England and Scotland to do so. Nevertheless, they swiftly attained an unofficial *quasi*-confessional status beyond the United Provinces, being frequently cited and appealed to as an important doctrinal benchmark. The Synod itself was often used for procedural precedent, as in the great Scottish General Assembly of 1638.

Influence in America

The influence of the Synod of Dort directly on the formation of American religion is difficult to quantify since the early Dutch colonies were soon lost to the British.⁴² It would take later waves of Dutch Reformed immigrants to transplant their denominations and Three Forms of Unity to the United States.⁴³

Conclusion

As we noted at the beginning, hostile commentators have repudiated the Synod for heavy-handedness and more especially, the cold, scholastic tenor of its canons.⁴⁴ Regrettably, not a few of the theological grandchildren of Dort today have unwittingly validated this allegation in many minds by their less than irenic rhetoric. And yet, the very nature of Christian creeds necessitates both doctrinal affirmation *and negation*. Our Reformed confessions have placed the boundary markers of public truth – for churches, and in the case of Dort, of nations as well.

To blur the boundaries of orthodoxy enshrined within Scripture, especially in matters of soteriology has been the constant resort of the Deceiver throughout Church history. And he has often used very intelligent, very educated, very polite, and by all accounts, outwardly very pious people to do so. Such were a good many of the Remonstrants. But as the Synod recognized, their cause was not only fatal to the peace of the *state* but the peace of the *soul*. Their brand of “moderation” signaled a shift back to the Romanist Pelagian error, and for many of their number, it proved a first step towards full-blown Socinianism.

Today, there are many who profess the “Five Points of Calvinism” as a sort of “unofficial” creedal benchmark, but who have never even heard of the Synod of Dort. This is especially true of the “New Calvinism” that has swept Western Evangelicalism in the past decade – strong on soteriology, but probably weak on ecclesiology.

But creeds and confessions are *vitaly important*. The challenge for today’s new wave of “Calvinism” is, arguably, that it *only has* five points. And while Calvinism is *not less* than the “Five Points” articulated by Dort – or their more familiar reformulated “TULIP” acronym – it is certainly *much more*. This reductionism of the rich Calvinian tradition neglects the ecclesiological formulations of the Reformed tradition, which were admittedly not the focus of

⁴² See Hageman, “The Synod of Dort and American Beginnings.” Hageman argues cogently that Calvinism was a significant factor in the making of the so-called “New England Mind”, but is hard-pushed to find an immediate connection between that Calvinism and Dort, making a somewhat strained case of a second-hand link via the use of William Ames’ *Marrow of Divinity* at Harvard. Ames had been engaged in the Remonstrant debate. See *ibid.*, 100-2.

⁴³ See David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 116-9.

⁴⁴ Foster, “Liberal Calvinism: The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618.” This narrative has been increasingly countered by recent scholarship of Bob Godfrey and others, who have pointed out the pastoral vision and benefits of the canons. W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sanford: Reformation Trust, 2019).

the Synod, nor did they take the bait of Calderwood and others to make pronouncements there.⁴⁵

We have said that the Synod of Dort's agenda was necessarily limited by the scope of the Arminian party. But this agenda provided subject material of more than sufficient importance all by itself! The matter of how redemption is accomplished and applied is the very *heart of the Christian Gospel*. While it would be another three decades before the Westminster Divines articulated a much *broader* creedal definition of full-orbed Calvinism, Dort provided the Church with a crucial foundation stone for its *soteriology*. And so while we could wish our latter-day Calvinists to embrace that *broader* Reformed vision for church government, civil government, purity of worship, education, the family, etc., let us be thankful that in recent years many Evangelicals have at least come to rediscover and build upon *the soteriological foundation* defined by Dort. It is that Gospel bedrock that the succeeding papers of this journal will explore.

⁴⁵ It is significant however, that not a few of the Dortian delegates who represented churches with a more representative, "Presbyterian" ecclesiology were perturbed by the perceived precedence afforded the English Bishop Carleton. Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*.