

Donald Sinnema / Christian Moser / Herman J. Selderhuis (eds.)

Early Sessions of the Synod of Dordt

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(1618–1619)

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Early Sessions
of the Synod of Dordt

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Preface

This second volume of the Synod of Dordt project is the result of the joint forces of twenty five international scholars, who have transcribed and edited the documents of the synod.

Due to the discovery of new sources and the multitude of documents, it has become necessary to publish volume II in two parts: the Convening of the Synod of Dordt, and the Early Sessions of the Synod of Dordt.

The general editors wish to express thanks to the Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek in Emden as leading institution in this project, to the supporting partner-institutions, and to all participating editors. Special mention must be made of the efforts of Janika Bischof and Dagmar Bronner who did commendable work in their role of editorial assistant.

We wish to thank the “Stichting Deddens-Koppefonds,” the “Stichting Jagtspool Fonds” and the “Stichting Vrienden van Heidelberg en Dordrecht” for their generous financial support of this volume as they continue to make the progress of this project possible. Special thanks are also due to a generous donor and to Calvin Theological Seminary for administering a North American fund that is being used to support the project.

This vast project has been enabled by the generous willingness of eighteen European archives to provide ready access to the hundreds of manuscripts consulted for the documents contained in this volume.

Transcribing and editing manuscripts demands patience and passion, and both have been exhibited by all institutions and scholars involved.

Donald Sinnema
Christian Moser
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Introduction

The Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) was convened at the Dutch city of Dordrecht primarily to settle the Arminian controversy that had agitated the Netherlands for about twenty years. The controversy centered mainly on predestination and related points. The synod also addressed other discipline cases and made decisions on a variety of other ecclesiastical matters.

In a context where church and state were in an entangled relationship, the synod was convened by the Dutch government, the States General.

Participants

This was a national synod of the Dutch Reformed churches, but it was a synod with an international character, with theological delegates from eight foreign territories (Great Britain, the Palatinate, Hesse, four Swiss cantons, Nassau-Wetteravia, Geneva, Bremen and Emden), who joined the Dutch delegates. The Dutch participants consisted of eleven delegations from the nine Dutch provincial and particular synods, as well as a delegation of Dutch theologians and a Walloon delegation. In addition, there were eighteen state delegates, representing the States General. Their role was to give direction on procedural matters and to ensure that the synod did not impinge on political affairs; they did not enter into the theological issues.

A group of thirteen Remonstrant (or Arminian) leaders were summoned to appear before the synod to explain and defend their views,¹ so that the synod could examine and make a judgment about Remonstrant views that were considered to deviate from the accepted doctrine of the Dutch Reformed churches. Leiden theologian Simon Episcopius was their spokesman. Initially, three Remonstrants representing the Utrecht Remonstrant synod were seated as regular delegates during the Pro-Acta sessions, which dealt with various non-doctrinal matters. The cited Remonstrants arrived at the synod on 6 December, and the agenda immediately turned to the Remonstrant theological case. At this point, the two Remonstrant ministers from the Utrecht Remonstrant delegation, under some pressure, joined the cited Re-

¹ See nos. II/2.29–30.

monstrants,² raising the number to fifteen. The Remonstrants were seated at a table in the middle of the hall where the synod met.

Procedure

The procedures for the synodical deliberations were focused on the delegations present at the synod. So voting was by delegation rather than by the individual delegate. The advice that was presented on issues followed the order of rank of the delegations, first the foreign delegations by order of their international status in relation to the Dutch Republic – the British first – and then the Dutch delegations according to their seating order in the States General. The advice of a delegation could be presented orally, but on important issues it was usually expected that advice be written. The synod officers collected the advice of all nineteen delegations, and, based on all of the advice, they drew up a common synodical decision on the topic. The whole synod then had the opportunity to approve the decision or seek a revision; if necessary, the synod officers revised the decision once or twice before it received final approval by the synod.

The Remonstrants were present in the synod during the early sessions after they arrived, but as the procedural debates heated up, they were called to be present only in certain sessions. They had the opportunity to submit, and sometimes read, written documents that expressed their viewpoint, especially on matters of procedure but also on doctrinal issues.

Four Phases

The synod met for six and a half months from 13 November 1618 to 29 May 1619. The general proceedings of the synod consisted of four phases: (1) In the Pro-Acta sessions, which lasted for just over three weeks before the arrival of the cited Remonstrants, the synod focused on several non-doctrinal ecclesiastical matters. (2) After the arrival of the cited Remonstrants, the synod was largely entangled in procedural debates with them for five weeks until they were expelled from the synod on 14 January 1619. (3) After their expulsion, the synod for almost four months focused on examining Remonstrant writings and preparing its response to the Remonstrant case. Based on advice from each of the delegations, the synod issued its judgment, the Canons of Dordt. Other discipline cases regarding Maccovius and Vorstius were also addressed, and there was a review and approval of the Belgic Confession and

² See nos. II/2.136–140.

Heidelberg Catechism. (4) In the Post-Acta sessions, after the foreign theologians returned home, the Dutch delegates focused on various ecclesiastical matters of specific relevance to the Dutch churches, especially a revision of the church order.

This volume contains the full range of documents produced by the Synod of Dordt, or related to the synod, from the first two phases of the synod, i.e., the Pro-Acta sessions and the period of procedural debates.

Pro-Acta Sessions

From 13 November to 6 December 1618, the synod was occupied with opening formalities and addressed various non-doctrinal concerns.

After the synod opened under the direction of the state delegates, the credentials of the Dutch delegations and professors were read,³ and the synodical officers were selected – Johannes Bogerman as President, Jacobus Rolandus and Hermannus Faukelius as assessors or vice-presidents, and Sebastiaan Dammannus and Festus Hommius as secretaries. The articles to convene the synod, which had been adopted by the States General on 11 November 1617, were also read.⁴

Since the primary reason for holding the synod was to deal with the Remonstrant controversy, the synod decided to summon a group of Remonstrant leaders, so letters of citation were sent out, both from the synod and from the state delegates.⁵

While awaiting the arrival of the cited Remonstrants, the synod addressed five ecclesiastical matters that had been forwarded, as gravamina or overtures, from the Dutch provincial synods to the national synod.

First, since there was a great need for a new Dutch Bible translation, the synod decided to authorize such a translation, and made several preliminary decisions about how the translation would be done. There were decisions on whether to include the apocryphal books (in a separate section), and on how to refer to God.⁶ Translators and supervisors were selected. It was not until 1637 that this translation, known as the *Staten-vertaling*, was actually completed.

Second, the synod discussed the topic of catechizing. After a decision on catechism preaching, the synod addressed how best to do catechetical instruction. Based on advice from the foreign and Dutch delegations, the synod

³ See nos. II/2.4–28.

⁴ See ADSND II/1, Pt. Two, Sect. 17.

⁵ See nos. II/2.29–30.

⁶ See nos. II/2.32–36.

decided on various guidelines for teaching catechism in the context of the school, home and church.⁷

Third, the synod considered a question that arose in the Dutch colonies in the East Indies, about whether slave children who were part of Christian families should be baptized. Though there were differing sentiments on the question, the synod decided that if children of non-Christian parents were taken into Christian families, they should not be baptized until they reached the age of discretion.⁸

Fourth, in order to standardize theological training for students preparing for the ministry in Dutch Reformed churches, the synod adopted some regulations relating to their training. For instance, it was agreed that students and candidates should not perform baptism, but it was left to the discretion of the classes whether they would be allowed to preach in public worship services.⁹

Fifth, since there was concern that unauthorized materials were being published, and that the printing of Remonstrant and seditious ideas was not being well regulated, the synod also addressed the issue of abuses in the printing trade. The various delegations generally agreed on the need for a censorship committee of scholars to approve new publications. But due to pressures of the Remonstrant case, the synod did not draw up a printing regulation that it expected to send to the States General along with a request for a public resolution to prevent printing abuses.¹⁰

Procedural Debates with the Remonstrants

From 6 December, when the cited Remonstrants first appeared at the synod, until their expulsion on 14 January 1619, the synod and the Remonstrants were largely engaged in prolonged procedural debates that erupted in multiple forms. While the doctrinal differences surfaced in this period in a minimal way, the focus of contention centered on how to deal with the doctrinal questions.

A fundamental cause of the procedural debates was the fact that the two sides differently identified the central issue in the controversy. For the Contra-Remonstrants, the issue was Remonstrant doctrinal deviation in their view of predestination and related points, especially in their view that God predestined people on the condition of foreseen faith. For the Remonstrants, the issue centered on extreme views of reprobation advocated by certain

⁷ See nos. II/2.37–58.

⁸ See nos. II/2.59–78.

⁹ See nos. II/2.79–99.

¹⁰ See nos. II/2.100–117.

Contra-Remonstrant and other Reformed theologians. Since the Remonstrants were not delegates, but were summoned before the synod, in these circumstances they made every attempt to have the reprobation issue placed on the agenda. They wanted to be assured that they would have full freedom to refute Contra-Remonstrant views of reprobation and that the synod would examine and declare its judgment on such views.

On 7 December Episcopius delivered a long oration to clarify the motives and background of the Remonstrant position.¹¹ After the speech, a side debate erupted about whether he had a second copy of the speech to submit to the synod.¹²

Already when the Remonstrants first arrived at the synod, the issue of its authority was raised. When Episcopius said the Remonstrants were ready to have a conference (*collatio*) on the points in dispute, they were firmly reminded that the intention of the synod was not to hold a conference between equal parties; rather, they were cited to have their views judged.

On 10 December the Remonstrants wished to read a paper that asserted that they did not recognize the synod as their lawful judge, because its members were the opposing party in the conflict, and because many of its Dutch delegates had participated in schisms. They demanded that twelve conditions be met before they could recognize the synod. Their basic demands were that both parties be equally represented, and that the synod seek accommodation between the two sides.¹³ This led to a reprimand, and the next day the Remonstrants presented a formal protest that categorically rejected the authority of the synod as a legitimate judge of the controversy.¹⁴ The synod considered the protest and declared it groundless.

When the Remonstrants were asked to present in writing their views on Article One concerning predestination, debate arose about whether the citation letters required their views to be presented orally or in writing. The Remonstrants finally yielded and promised to present their views in writing. So on 13 December they submitted their Statement (“Sententia”) on Article One in the form of ten theses.¹⁵ This they offered to fulfill the first of three requirements spelled out in their citation letters – to state, explain and defend their views. The synod immediately complained that these ten theses rejected the views of others more than it stated their own views. President Bogerman gave two admonitions: they must affirmatively present their own views and afterwards refute opposing views; they must keep to the topic of election

¹¹ See no. II/2.131.

¹² See nos. II/2.132–134.

¹³ See no. II/2.142.

¹⁴ See no. II/2.146.

¹⁵ See ADSND IV, Pt. Seven, Sect. 1.