

Joel R. Beeke / Martin I. Klauber (eds.)

The Synod of Dort

Historical, Theological, and Experiential
Perspectives



Academic Studies

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David W. Hall

Foreword

Dort's Durability: From the Past, For the Future

One occasionally hears the tired, tattered line that there is a world of difference between the early Reformation creedal symbols and the latter ones. Supposedly (although for any legends reading person, Richard Muller and others have surely put such urban legends to rest), the early Reformers were more flexible, less dogmatic, inclusive fellows, while the later Puritans were grumpy, sclerotic, and narrow. As one summary put it: the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism was the buoyant “springtime” of the Reformation, while less than a century later, the Westminster Confession was the weathered “autumn” of the Reformation.

While such a case is difficult to make, let us momentarily hypothesize the correctness of that slogan. Should such narrowing and hardening have truly occurred, would the Synod of Dort, then, be the verdant “summer” or zenith of the maturing movement? This volume of fine essays attempts to make the case that the Dort consensus exhibits both a balanced and mature expression of the pristine Reformation, while also being an important bridge between the sixteenth century confessions and those from the seventeenth century. Most of these authors would stress the continuity between these various generations of symbols (including a foundation in antiquity), while obviously appreciating the differing contexts.

Dort, however, is the lesser known sibling for many Anglophones. Situated in the Netherlands, it is even—at times, wrongly—thought to be a uniquely Dutch manifesto. That is hardly the truth. As W. Robert Godfrey and others make clear, Dort was the closest thing to an ecumenical Reformed council, in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Its environment, to be sure, was provincially Dutch; however, with representatives and influence from England, Scotland, Geneva itself (e.g., Giovanni Diodati), France, and elsewhere, it was safely guarded from a damning provincialism. Such catholic composition may be one key to its durability.

The synod met during 1618–1619 and likely provided the new mold for such assemblies (as later at Westminster, 1643–1649). The early Reformed church placed large emphasis on ecumenical agreement with other Protestants, perhaps modeling this ethos after Acts 15. To be sure, earlier Colloquies (Augsburg, Poissy, Paris, Emden, the English Presbytery in 1596, etc.) had taken place and

were respected. Yet, when this synod gathered at a Dutch locale, they sought to clarify (even polemically, as needed) and fortify the belief system of the Reformation, and they included other mature voices.

Similarly, this volume adds the voices of these modern contributors to many others from a commemorative cycle. Within these pages, readers learn about the political context, the theological issues at stake, key personalities at the synod, ignored emphases (such as the work of the Holy Spirit—to the surprise of many who are unacquainted with the sources), and the role of preaching and piety—interspersed also with appropriate critiques. All in all, one has under this single cover both a sturdy introduction to a peak performance of Reformed orthodoxy and a proper appreciation, memorializing an important theological and pastoral benchmark.

A different commemoration for another doctrinal symbol was celebrated in the spirit commended by these essays: “The end of this anniversary is not self-glorification and an ostentatious parade of denominationalism. Nay, God’s hand is in it, and it means remembrance, stimulus, inspiration, life from the dead, and a glorious flood of light on some of the dark problems of history.”¹ William Symington also put commemorations like this anthology in good perspective:

We would not be chargeable with the enormous wickedness of forgetting that men are only what God makes them, and that to Him all the glory ... is to be ascribed. But we are, at the same time, unable to see wherein the bestowment of a due need of praise on the memory of such ... contravenes any maxim of sound morality, or any dictate of inspiration. We ... have no hesitation in attempting to awaken, in the men of the present generation, sentiments of admiration and gratitude for the memory of worthies to whom all are so deeply indebted. ... While we claim and exercise the right of bringing these, like all other human productions, to the infallible touchstone of Revelation, ... we cannot but cherish the hope that the present commemoration, ... may be regarded as symptomatic at once of a growing attachment to the sentiments ... and of an enlightened determination to maintain them more firmly and diffuse them more extensively than ever.²

1 *Addresses at the Celebration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA*, ed. William Henry Roberts (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1898), 274.

2 William Symington, “Historical Sketch of the Westminster Assembly of Divines,” in *Commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Glasgow, 1843), 69, 71.

We may even find this appreciation of memorializing such grand synods to be helpful:

In such commemorations there is a great moral element. Sometimes it is good to get free from the narrow environments of the immediate present and ascend some eminence which commands a view of ways long since trodden, and then, from what is taught in the review, learn to forecast the ever-widening way of the future. It is only by such studies that we catch the spirit of the great historic eras which have been potent in shaping the institutions of our own times. It is only when we can transport ourselves to the distant past and evoke from its obscurity the forms of its heroic men; it is only when we acquaint ourselves with the errors they combated, the difficulties they surmounted, the hardships they endured, that we can fully comprehend the character of the men who thus toiled and suffered, or appreciate the value.³

The essays that follow, individually and collectively, target these ends and hope to serve the churches in the future as well as this particular doctrinal symbol that has resiliently served us already.

3 *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly, 1647–1897*, ed. Francis Beattie et al. (Richmond, Va.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897), 189.

Editorial Preface

The Synod of Dort was an international conference of Reformed leaders held from November 13, 1618, to May 29, 1619, in the town of Dordrecht in the Netherlands. The year 2019, therefore, marked the 400th anniversary of its conclusion. It is famous for its so-called five Heads of responses with corresponding rejections of errors, which together served as a refutation of the five Remonstrances of the followers of Arminius on the nature of divine grace and the perseverance of believers into glory. As an international Synod, Dort had a significant impact on the definition of Reformed orthodoxy for decades and centuries to come. In countries such as France, the Canons of Dort served as an essential boundary for Reformed orthodoxy and all pastors had to swear allegiance to them. Despite its tremendous influence, the decisions of Dort remain a mystery to many today and are subject to stereotypes ranging from an extreme form of divine determinism to the hijacking of the pure theology of Calvin. This volume seeks to shed light on various aspects of the Synod of Dort in order to inform the contemporary reader about its proper historical, theological, and experiential context. Some of the leading scholars of post-Reformation Reformed thought and the Synod have contributed essays to this work. Most of these chapters were originally delivered as papers either at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver in November 2018 or at the Westminster Seminary California Annual Conference held in January 2019. It should be noted that the vast majority of contributors to this volume come from a Reformed perspective and generally portray how many Reformed Christians have responded to the Synod of Dort throughout the centuries. A look at how those from an Arminian or non-Reformed position have viewed the same events would, of course, yield a very different narrative. However, the editors and contributors have striven to focus on the historical and theological development of interactions with Dort rather than on their own, personal positions.

The book is divided into three major sections designed to provide a more thorough overall perspective on the synod. The first section looks at the reception of the Canons of Dort among the Reformed churches in France where they were accepted and enforced starting with the National Synod of Alais in 1620. These chapters dig deeper into key individuals, such as Pierre du Moulin, who led the way for the Canons of Dort to be enforced as a test for orthodoxy. However, there were some internal questions, concerns, and even objections to the canons within France which are detailed in these chapters.

The second section homes in on the theology of Dort with particular attention to the doctrines of election and the nature of the atonement, both of which were at the heart of theological discussions at the synod. This section also includes an important chapter on the relationship between church and state, and some of the unique political challenges that Reformed churches faced in the Netherlands.

Finally, the third major section looks at how believers attempted to apply the theology of Dort to their daily lives and devotion to Christ. The authors here attempt to show how the delegates at Dort attempted to combine both piety and theological orthodoxy. Special attention is given to the role of the Holy Spirit as an essential aspect of the synod. These chapters indicate that this was not merely a theological conference, but one that had experiential and practical implications as well. The book concludes with a chapter on the usefulness of Dort for many believers today, even if they have never heard of the Synod of Dort at all. The hope is that this volume will raise awareness of the importance of Dort both in history and for individuals and churches today.

W. Robert Godfrey

1. The Synod of Dort and Strategic Thinking

When the Synod of Dort gathered in November 1618, the confessional Calvinists had already won the critical ecclesiastical and political battles. Their opponents—known in their day as Remonstrants and in the present day as Arminians—had labored diligently but failed to prevent a national synod from meeting.

The Arminians had challenged the theology embedded in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, the official doctrinal statements of the Dutch Reformed Church. They recognized that they were a small minority of the ministers and members of the church and that the disciplinary authority of the broader assemblies of the church would act against them if given a chance. They had sought support and protection from political authorities. Their identity as Remonstrants had come from the petition they had presented to the civil government—the Remonstrance of 1610—appealing for the government to tolerate and protect their theological views. But over time that support collapsed and the political leadership authorized the calling of the national synod to judge the Arminian theology.

The delegates to the Synod, not only from the local synods of the Dutch Reformed Church but also from most of the Reformed churches of Europe, knew that their primary responsibility was to answer and refute the theology of the Arminians. They also clearly wanted to show that true Calvinist theology was vital and contributed to pious Christian living. They expressed their doctrine and piety in the Canons of Dort (CD). That piety and theology have been carefully and helpfully studied through the years by both champions and critics of the Synod.¹

What has not been so carefully considered are the strategic concerns that helped shape the writing of the canons. To raise this matter is not to suggest

1 Recent years have seen something of a renewal of scholarly interest in the Synod of Dort: Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds., *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Aza Goudriaan and F. A. van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *Handbook of Dutch Church History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019); Daniel Hyde, *Grace Worth Fighting For: Recapturing the Vision of God's Grace in the Canons of Dort* (Lincoln, Neb.: The Davenant Institute, 2019); Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, eds., *A Faith Worth Defending: The Synod of Dort's Enduring Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019).

that the Reformed delegates were media savvy in a modern sense or had public relations experts advising them. It is to suggest that the delegates were aware of various audiences that would read their canons and determined to make those canons as persuasive as possible to those audiences.

At least four audiences would have been in the minds of the synodical delegates as they did their work at Dort. The first was the community of strong Reformed believers whom the synod wanted to confirm in its faith. The second audience was those undecided observers whom the synod wanted to convince through its work. The third was the Arminian critics whose various challenges and criticisms the synod wanted to refute. The fourth audience was the political leadership who supported orthodox theology.

The Arminians had always, of course, also operated strategically as well as theologically. Their strategy in the church and in relation to the civil government had been to support a strongly Erastian church polity. Such a polity was understandably attractive to political leaders as an increase in their power with respect to the church. Civil magistrates in the Netherlands—and indeed throughout Europe—wanted to keep the church largely under state control. The Arminians supported an Erastian polity in order to weaken the Calvinist push for a more independent synodical church authority where opportunities for disciplining the Arminians would be greater.

The Arminian strategy was not just to present their views at a sophisticated academic level and to gain support from the political elite, but also to find ways to weaken the appeal of Calvinism to common people in the churches. To that end, they attacked Calvinism for undermining the fairness and goodness of God, for eliminating human freedom, and for denying the availability of grace.² They further portrayed Calvinism as a religion that necessarily led to gloom, fear, and uncertainty and that stood against fundamentals of historic Christianity.

One can see an element of that strategy in their Remonstrance of 1610. The document, prepared a year after the death of Arminius and signed by forty-two of his ministerial supporters, was not intended to be a public document. The strategy there in the first place was to sound as close to traditional Reformed theology as possible while subtly redefining terms so that the magistrates would be attracted to their position. This Remonstrance summarized their views in five points on election, atonement, sin, grace, and perseverance. After this document was made public, much of the subsequent debate continued to be in terms of these five topics. In the years between the Remonstrance and the Synod, the

2 These critiques of Calvinism are common to critiques of Augustinian theologies through the centuries.

Arminian views (there was significant diversity among the Arminians) became less subtle and some of them became quite radical.

The delegates to the Synod of Dort understood that Arminian challenge and strategy clearly. That history shaped the decision of the Synod on how to write the canons. They retained the division of the topics in five points. Each of the topics—commonly called heads of doctrine—was presented in several positive articles stating the orthodox Reformed teaching, followed by the statement and refutation of various Arminian errors. The canons as a whole were written in a “popular” form, that is to say, for the people of the church, rather than for academics.

The Calvinists certainly had presented through the years before the synod many detailed and carefully argued theological responses to the Arminians. They were theologically clear in presenting their views in the canons, but there they also sought to be persuasive strategically. We can see that in—as is obviously appropriate—five areas: 1) the general character of the canons, 2) the canons’ appeal to authority, 3) some of the canons’ topics, 4) the canons’ epithets used in reference to the Arminians, and 5) the canons’ specific language choices.

None of these observations about strategy imply that what is said or how it is said is done insincerely or cynically simply in the interests of some strategic success. But as those educated in rhetoric as taught by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, they knew how to think about persuasion. In this chapter, we will consider the Dortian divines’ strategy from several perspectives.

The Character of the Canons: Preface and Catholicity

The strategic character of the canons can begin to be seen in the Preface which the synod prepared for the canons. The synod approved the canons and their Conclusion on April 23, 1619. Two days later it adopted a Preface to the canons as a brief historical and theological introduction to the need for the synod and its work. This Preface has seldom been reprinted and is not regarded as part of the official confessional teaching of the Synod.³ Still, it is quite illuminating about the mind of the Synod, including its strategic efforts to be persuasive. This Preface runs to about eleven hundred words. Throughout it maintains a strong—at times quite emotional—appeal for support of the Synod’s work. It introduces well the points about strategy made in this study.

The Preface begins with the words: “Among the many comforts which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave to his church militant in its troubled sojourn,

3 Quotations from the Preface and from the canons are from a new translation in Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 27–30, 35–77.

one in particular is rightly celebrated.” The theme of comfort introduced immediately here was very dear to Reformed people who had been nurtured on the Heidelberg Catechism with its opening question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The Preface underscores that Christians look to Christ in their troubles for this comfort.

The particular promise, and comfort to which the synod then turns is the promise “I am with you always even until the end of the age.” This “delightful promise” accompanies the church through its whole history in all its difficulties. The church needs this comfort, declares the Preface, not only in the face of violent persecution and terrible heresies, but also in the face of “the hidden cunning of seducers.” The presence of Christ had protected his church from all these dangers in all ages. The language here of the hidden cunning of seducers is strong and clearly directed at the Arminians.

The next point made is that Christ has always used means to accomplish this protection. The first means mentioned is this: “Clear proof of this truth stands in the histories of the pious emperors, kings, and princes, whom the Son of God so many times has raised up for the protection of his church.” Here and later in this Preface the cajoling of the civil magistrate is very evident, praising them for their central, divinely appointed role in protecting the church.

The canons outlined that Christ used these pious political leaders to provide for “the remedies of holy synods when contending with false teachers.” Here, of course, the Preface looks back to the first ecumenical council in Nicaea in 325, called by the Emperor Constantine, and to all the work of Christian civil magistrates in the centuries thereafter. These synods stood for the truth, opposed those they labeled ministers of Satan, suppressed error and discord, “preserved the church in the harmony of pure religion, and transmitted sound worship to posterity undiminished.” The great blessings of truth, harmony, and faithful worship are the fruit of Christ’s work through holy synods. Here is strong, strategic praise of the value of synods.

They argued that what Christ did through the whole history of the church, he has done most recently in the Netherlands. He liberated the church “from the tyranny of the Roman Antichrist and the horrible papal idolatry;” protected it through the long civil war, and caused it to flourish to “the joy of the whole Reformed world.” Here the Preface links the Synod of Dort to the great struggle of the Dutch against tyranny and idolatry and implicitly shows it as part of the flourishing of the Reformed church and the Dutch republic.

The Preface is explicit in stating that trouble came into the church through the person of Arminius and his followers, the Remonstrants: “this most flourishing church would have been consumed in the horrible fire of these dissensions and

schisms unless the compassion of our Savior had intervened.”⁴ The Arminians had ignited a conflagration threatening the church.

The Preface then moves to this remarkable confession: “Blessed forever be the Lord, who after he had hidden his face for a moment from us (who had provoked his wrath and indignation in many ways), has shown the whole world that he does not forget his covenant and does not scorn the sighing of his people.” The synod acknowledged humbly—though not specifically—that the church had deserved the wrath of God for its sins.

The Preface then returns to the theme of the necessary help of civil magistrates. When all seemed hopeless God moved the States General and Maurits, the Prince of Orange, “to use those legitimate means which the Apostles themselves practiced,” namely, the calling of a synod. Mention is also made of other European princes who helped, especially King James of Great Britain.⁵

By this synod “true doctrine [was] established and false doctrine rejected, and—by the divine blessing—harmony, peace, and tranquility...restored to the Dutch churches.” The synod had been preceded by gatherings for prayer and fasting and the synod committed itself by a sacred oath to judge matters only by the Word of God.

The Preface finally gives a summary of the Synod’s judgment at the end of its work: “through the singular grace of God, with the greatest diligence, faith, and conscience, this synod achieved the absolute consensus of all and each member, to the glory of God. So, for the integrity of the truth of salvation, the tranquility of consciences, and the peace of well-being of the Dutch church...” Here at the end, as throughout, the Preface strategically appeals to the reader to recognize the hand of God and the sincere piety of the Reformed in the work of the Synod. It is both sincere and clever.

The Catholicity of the Canons

Moving beyond the Preface, the synod prepared the canons proper. It decided that each head of doctrine would begin with a catholic statement of doctrine, that is, a statement of doctrine with which Roman Catholics and Lutherans as well as Reformed Christians would agree. The intent was to show strategically

4 Arminius and the Remonstrants are referred to by name in the Preface, but in the canons, they are never referred to by name.

5 Although at the time James was King James I of England and King James VI of Scotland, his kingship and his realm are always referred to in Dort’s documents as Great Britain.

that Reformed convictions were not novel or sectarian, but flowed properly out of common, catholic teaching.⁶

Beyond that general approach of grounding its theology in catholic truth, the canons at times are explicit in identifying with ancient, catholic doctrine. In head III/IV, rejection 3, the tables are turned on the Arminians and they are accused of “novelty.” This kind of claim is reiterated in head III/IV, rejection 6, where the Arminian doctrine is declared to be “repugnant to the continual practice of the church.” Again, in head III/IV, rejection 9, the synod judges that the Arminian position had been “condemned long ago by the ancient church.” In another expression, the synod rejected the Arminian position as “against the perpetual consensus of evangelical doctrine” (V, rej. 2).

Appeal to Authority

The Canons of Dort make clear that the Scriptures alone are the authority on which Reformed theology rests. Neither tradition nor logic determines true doctrine. Reformed theology is derived from the Bible alone. As the Reformation began with the Scriptures as the only ultimate authority, so the Synod of Dort was determined to continue.

In the very first article of the first head of doctrine, after stating the doctrine of the fall of all humans in Adam, the canons continue: “The Apostle teaches this: ‘The whole world is guilty under the condemnation of God’; ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’; and ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 3:19, 23; 6:23).” Here the point is made subtly but strategically that this point of doctrine and all subsequent points of doctrine are derived from the Bible alone. The Scriptures are not quoted too frequently in the positive articles of the various heads of doctrine. The positive statements of doctrine stand most of the time in their inherent simplicity, clarity, and cogency. By contrast in the rejection of errors the Scriptures are quoted in most of the articles and often without comment, as if to say that it is utterly obvious that the Calvinists have simply taught what the Bible teaches.

Topics

While the topics addressed by the synod were set by the theological debates of the years before the Synod, some of the topics in particular were shaped

6 For a full discussion, see W. Robert Godfrey, “Popular and Catholic: The Modus Docendi in the Synod of Dort,” in Goudriaan, *Revisiting the Synod of Dort* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

by strategic as well as theological considerations. In this section, five specific topics will be considered: 1) infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism, 2) the uses of the means of grace, 3) election and worthiness, 4) assurance, and 5) the salvation of infants.

Infralapsarianism and Supralapsarianism

From the beginning of the theological controversies in the Netherlands, Arminius had particularly and viciously attacked supralapsarianism.⁷ He had kept these attacks private until 1608 when he finally expressed them openly in his “Declaration of Sentiments.” This attack was in part a strategy to try to set infralapsarian Calvinists against supralapsarian Calvinists, in the hope that if the Calvinists fell to fighting among themselves, they might have less time and energy to oppose the Arminians. The Remonstrants tried this tactic again at the synod and again had no success. The canons do not address the differences between infralapsarians and supralapsarians directly, but stated the doctrine of election in such a way that both sides could easily endorse it. The canons approach election beginning with the human condition and moving from there to the divine decree. This approach is most congenial to infralapsarianism, but poses no problem for supralapsarians. The Calvinist strategy was to treat their divergent opinions as very much secondary in importance and entirely tolerable within the bounds of Calvinist orthodoxy. The Calvinists accomplished this by simply not mentioning it explicitly.

The Uses of the Means of Grace

If God in eternity has decreed some individuals to eternal life and if that decree must be irresistibly carried out, what real value and effect can the ministry of the church, its preaching, sacraments, prayers, and discipline, actually have? Since Christians live out their lives in the church, any theology must show the actual importance of the church. The canons strongly asserted the importance of the church and the means of grace, not just at the beginning of the Christian life but throughout it. In each of the heads of doctrine the importance of the means of grace are declared. The fullest statement explaining the Reformed understanding of the means of grace is found in head III/IV, article 17. There the canons state that God works through the means he has appointed and requires that Christians use them. This linkage was key to the strength, centrality, and health of the church in Reformed Christianity.

7 For an expanded discussion of this point, see Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, Appendix 1: “Arminius: A New Look.”

Election and Worthiness

One of the essential Christian virtues is humility. That virtue is not unique to the Reformed, but is a great virtue in nearly every form of Christianity. The Calvinists rightly sensed that the Arminian theology necessarily undermined humility, positing a greater worthiness in those who responded to God's grace than in those who rejected it. To show that the Arminians have a theology that undermines humility in a basic way is a clever strategy.

This subject is briefly introduced in head I, article 7: "Those chosen were neither better nor more worthy than others, but were like others fallen into the common human misery." The issue of worthiness is expanded on in the rejections of errors. In head I, rejection 5, the Arminian error is summarized in part: "It [election] becomes complete and decisive on the basis of final perseverance of foreseen faith, repentance, holiness, and piety. This is the gracious and evangelical worthiness, on account of which he who is elect is more worthy than he who is not elect." The Calvinists reply simply that such "teaching is repugnant to the whole Scripture."

In head I, rejection 9, this error is sharply rejected as contrary to Moses and Christ: "The reason God sends his Gospel to one people rather than to another is not merely and solely the good pleasure of God, but because one people is better and more worthy than another people to whom the Gospel is not communicated." If Europeans—including Calvinists—had really embraced this rejection, the history of colonialism might have been very different.

Assurance

In the Remonstrance of 1610 the Arminians had expressed uncertainty about the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. The claim there that they needed more time to study this matter was a strategy to gain time and sympathy. Many among the Reformed Christians believed it was clearly disingenuous. Since the days of Calvin, the doctrine of perseverance had been the clear and forceful teaching of the Reformed. It is not surprising then that the canons clearly reiterate this teaching in its fifth head of doctrine.

What may be somewhat surprising is that after eight articles on perseverance, the fifth head of doctrine turns in articles 9–13 to the subject of the assurance, or the certainty, of salvation and perseverance. The theology and piety of the canons in its teaching on assurance is stated clearly and helpfully presented there. It also has an important strategic function. The Reformed teaching on perseverance is foundational to the Reformed teaching that a Christian can and should have confidence, not just in being presently in a state of salvation, but in remaining in that state for all of life. Here is a great comfort and joy for any Christian: saved now means saved forever. The strategic significance

of pressing this Calvinist doctrine against the gloomy and fearful picture of Calvinism painted by the Arminians is obvious. Head V, article 15, rightly celebrates perseverance and assurance as glorifying God and comforting pious souls.

Interestingly, the only point in the canons in which the Arminians are charged with papist errors is in relation to assurance in head V, rejection 5. The Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine had labeled this doctrine of the Calvinists the greatest heresy of the Reformation. But the synod saw this teaching as a great comfort and encouragement for the people of God.

The Salvation of Infants

One of the most powerful strategic arguments of the Arminians—already stated in Remonstrance of 1610—was that the Calvinistic doctrine was a threat to children, especially the children of good Christians. This issue was very important theologically, reflecting the relationship between election and covenant. The Calvinists rejected the Arminian charge very clearly already in their Counter-Remonstrance of 1611. The issue was still volatile enough that the synod gave one of its positive articles to it in the first head of doctrine: “We are to judge the will of God from his Word. The Word testifies that the children of the faithful are holy, not by nature, but as a benefit of God’s gracious covenant. These children together with their parents are included in this covenant. Therefore, pious parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy” (CD I, 17).

The Calvinists returned to this topic using the particularly emotional language the Arminians had used against them in the Conclusion of the canons. The Conclusion adamantly rejects among the “false claims” made against Reformed teaching that “Many infants of the faithful are ripped innocent from the breasts of their mothers and tyrannically thrown into hell so that neither baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism help them.”

Almost every word of the false claim is emotionally loaded: “many,” “ripped,” “innocent,” “breasts of their mothers,” “tyrannically,” etc. Beyond labeling the claim false, the Conclusion did not respond to it. Its response is simply what it said in head I, article 17, insisting on the covenantal holiness, election, and salvation of these children of godly parents who die in infancy.

Epithets

The synod interestingly did not give their theological opponents as a group any identifying label in the canons. They are never called Arminians or Remon-

strants. This may reflect in part that their opponents were not entirely united and sometimes contradicted each other. The synod is content simply to reject the specific errors taught.

The canons do, however, at times label these false teachers and errors with the names of well-known heretics and heresies, always in the section of the canons known as the rejection of errors. By far the most frequent epithet used by the synod is that of Pelagian. The errors of Pelagius, the fifth-century opponent of Augustine, had long stood condemned in the western church. Successfully to attach the label of Pelagian to the Arminians was to show that they had embraced long rejected errors.

This charge is contained in the following articles: In head I, rejection 4, the Arminian teaching that sinners must use their natural abilities to dispose themselves to election is judged: “These things savor of Pelagius.” In head II, rejection 3, the synod rejects the teaching that Christ’s death only makes it possible for the Father to establish new conditions, including the use of free will, for human salvation, declaring that in this teaching “They recall the Pelagian error from hell.” In head II, rejection 6, the synod rejects the teaching that humans must use their free will to respond to and receive the mercy offered to all, as “the pernicious poison of Pelagianism.” In head III/IV, rejection 7, the synod labels as “entirely Pelagian” the Arminian teaching that moral persuasion is the only way in which grace works in the conversion of sinners. In head III/IV, rejection 9, the Arminian teaching that grace and free will must work together cooperatively for conversion receives this judgment: “This teaching of the Pelagians was condemned long ago by the ancient church.” In head V, rejection 2, the synod labeled as “obvious Pelagianism” the Arminian doctrine that the faithful have all the powers they need to do their duty so that they will persevere in grace.

Two other epithets are used one time each. As has been noted before, one is the label “papists” in head V, rejection 5, which is applied to those who teach that there can be no certainty of future perseverance apart from special revelation. (In a sense it is strange that this label is not used more often since it was often used in Dutch Reformed writings before the Synod.) The other label is applied to those who teach that an imperfect faith is accepted by God as earning justification. Of them, head II, rejection 4 states, “They teach, like the impious Socinus, a new and strange justification before God, against the consensus of the whole church.” Socinus was a notorious figure, denying the full divinity of Christ and rejecting an orthodox view of the work of Christ. Such a charge was serious indeed.

All of these labels were very sincerely meant to identify the errors of Arminianism. But they were also strategically clever to make clear how serious and destructive those errors were.

Specific Language

The specific words selected to express the teaching of the synod were carefully chosen to carry the truth, but also to carry strategic emotional persuasion. One can see this in phrases, nouns, and adjectives used in the canons. In what follows is just a sample of the language which is at times winsome, and at times strongly accusative.

Phrases

Consider the emotional character of these phrases and the appeal they make to the reader: “most joyful news” (I, 3), in reference to the preaching of the gospel of salvation in the life and death of Jesus; “graciously softens” (I, 6), in reference to God’s work in the hearts of the elect; “inexpressible comfort” (I, 6), in reference to the meaning of election for the “holy and pious”;⁸ “spiritual joy and holy satisfaction” (I, 12), in reference to the reaction of the elect on seeing the fruit of election in themselves; “absurd to make certainty uncertain” (I, rej. 7)—a clever, memorable, ridiculing response to the Arminian teaching that the certainty possible in this life is mutable; “supremely merciful” (II, 1), highlighting the profound, genuine mercy to be found in God (linked to “supremely just”); “immense mercy” (II, 2), in reference to the source of God’s decision to give Jesus to save sinners; “most valuable death” (II, 8), highlighting the character of the death of Jesus, whose death has a “living and saving efficacy” because that death is not mechanical but living and actually saving; and “sweetly and powerfully moves” (III/IV, 16), in reference to how grace operates to change the human will, again stressing that it is not mechanical or oppressive.

Nouns and Adjectives

More briefly, one can think of the strategic power simply of certain nouns and adjectives. For example, the use of the noun “multitude” in I, 7. The point here is that the number of the elect are a multitude, stressing that the elect are not a small, or insignificant number. Or consider the adjective “pernicious” used (I, rej. 3; II, rej. 6). The adjective labels as very harmful, indeed very destructive, first the Arminian error about the purpose of God and the meaning of the death of Christ, and second the serious Arminian misuse of the distinction between

8 The theme of comfort recurs several times with the implication that, if you do not find comfort in election, then you are not pious and holy. Other occurrences include: “lively comfort” (I, 14), in reference to comfort from election that lives in the hearts and experience of God’s people; “solid comfort” (V, 10 and V, rej. 5), in reference to the assurance that the elect will persevere; “all comfort” (V, 11), in reference to the description of the character of the Father in his relationships with the elect.

accomplishing and applying. On the positive side, the adjective “infinite” (II, 3) highlighted the immense, limitless greatness of the value of the death of Christ.

Conclusion

The tone and approach of the Preface, the canons, and the Conclusion show the triumphant Calvinists at their best. They were humble and reasonable and concerned for Christ, the truth, and the souls of sinners. No doubt, all of those sentiments were genuine. They were, however, also very strategically clever and winsome. Being strategic is certainly legitimate and wise. It is also strategic today in this four-hundredth anniversary year to notice and appreciate and perhaps appropriate this strategic reality.

Historical Perspectives (with a focus on France)