

## Review of the New Edition of the Files of the Dordrecht Synod (1618–1619)

This review was first published in [ERT \(2019\) 43:3, 281–285](#).

Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser and Herman J. Selderhuis (eds.), *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae 1618–1619*, vol. 1 [The Files of the Synod of Dordt, 1618–1619, vol. 1] Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014, cvii + 539 pp.

### Review

The lack of a critical publication of the final documents regarding one of the most important historical events concerning Reformed churches, namely the Synod of Dordt, has been one of the puzzles of church history research. The sources found in numerous European archives have never been used, nor have they been made accessible to the general public.

On behalf of the Johannes a Lasco Library in Emden, the first volume of the *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae 1618-1619* (ADSND) was published at the end of 2014. This volume is to be the least extensive, with just under 600 pages. The eight subsequent volumes are expected to have an average of 900 pages. The first volume covers only the various versions of the final reports produced at the time. However, these reports reveal a lot about the course of the Synod.

The other volumes will contain preparatory documents, minutes, positions taken by the nineteen delegations, reports of the condemned Remonstrants, and finally the reports and diary entries of the foreign and Dutch delegates. They will present almost exclusively unpublished and predominantly Latin texts (in addition to individual texts in Dutch, English, German and French) compiled from archives in the Netherlands, Switzerland, England and Germany.

The entire effort is an international undertaking. Selderhuis is a professor in the Netherlands, Moser in Zurich, and Sinnema in the USA. Germany is involved through the Johannes a Lasco Library, which is in charge of the project and which, in an exemplary

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

### Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618-1619)

Acta of the Synod of Dordt

Vol. 1

V&R

manner, is also involved in researching and presenting the history of the Reformed churches. It will be interesting to see if this ambitious work will truly be completed in time for the 400th anniversary of the Synod.

The critical edition of the various final reports of the Synod has been a great success. In a clear manner, the detailed introductory texts in English summarize what has been known so far. However, this information is supplemented with extensive information that became accessible during the process of editing. The name index briefly explains the functions of the individuals who are mentioned, but also, the front matter contains short biographies of all delegates. In addition, there is a very short register of biblical passages as well as a topical index. The texts themselves are lucidly edited. However, the texts of the final reports can be compared only via the topical index; they vary too much to be printed in parallel.

There is, first of all, the official final report of the minutes of the Synod ('Acta Authentica'), which was not published in the seventeenth century. Second comes a printed, largely abridged version of the final report that was published directly after the Synod ('Acta Contracta'). Third is an official version produced in the year following the Synod and intended for international distribution. This third item constitutes a strongly revised and slightly shortened version of the Acta Authentica, with linguistic changes made to almost every sentence. This version has long determined the historical image of Dordt. Only with the new edition does the extent of the editing become clear. Even though most of the editing was stylistic in nature, some rather subjectively formulated opinions turned into objective statements; conversely, many very sharp statements in Latin were softened.

The Dordrecht Synod (13 November 1618 to 9 May 1619) was the first and only general synod of the Reformed churches in Europe. All other Reformed synods in history were national synods. (The last two weeks of the Synod, on 13–29 May 1619 after the departure of the international representatives, in fact constituted a Dutch national synod.)

Over the course of 154 sessions, the Synod of Dordt shaped the future of Calvinism. Because of the importance of the Dordt resolutions on the doctrine of salvation, it is often overlooked that the Synod passed essential resolutions before the arrival of the Arminians and then again after the main Synod. There was the preparation of a new Bible translation from the original text by a large expert committee, which appeared in 1637 as the 'Statenvertaling' (the states' translation); a text on church order for the Dutch church, which endured for a long time and exerted an influence on many Reformed texts of church order around the world; and the establishment of the Sunday catechism sermon on the Heidelberg Catechism, which became customary far beyond the Netherlands. The synod also covered the order of church instruction by the family all the way up to the study of theology, an area where foreign participants left deep tracks. The distribution of the Lord's Supper to children of slaves and other matters were addressed as well.

In my opinion (and Selderhuis agrees), the Synod's significance is roughly comparable with that of the Book of Concord of the Lutheran Church, as Christians following the first-generation Reformers resolved disputes and achieved a 'formulation of *eenigheid*', or 'three forms of unity'.

The eighteen representatives of the eight Dutch States General consisted of nine high-ranking members of the highest governing bodies of the states (six of whom had received doctorates in law), along with five mayors of large cities plus a sheriff, and also four noblemen. These 18 state representatives always

had the last word, and they had received secret instructions. Meanwhile, almost sixty pastors and theologians, selected by the provincial synods, formed the majority of the Synod.

The foreign representatives came primarily from the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, namely the Palatinate, Hesse, Nassau-Wetterau, Bremen, Emden, the Swiss cantons of Zurich, Basel, Bern and Schaffhausen, and independent Geneva. The Electoral Prince of Brandenburg did not let the delegates of Brandenburg participate because of concern about tensions with the Lutherans in the country. The French delegates could not come because of a travel ban issued by King Louis XIII, which is why four chairs documenting their membership were empty during the entire period of the Synod. However, the synod of the French Reformed Church adopted the results of Dordt in 1620.



Additional foreign representatives came from England. The head of the delegation of the Anglican Church, George Carleton, was addressed throughout the Synod using his title of Bishop, and he occupied a chair with an episcopal covering. Walter Balcanqual was an Anglican priest but officially represented the reformed Church of Scotland. These unusual relations have been little researched.

Experts have discussed whether there was already an intention at the Synod to establish a new teaching standard in a confessional document, or whether the results only later gradually developed into a confessional standard. The editors tend to take the former view, and I agree with them. In my opinion, the volume does not permit any other conclusion, but one will, of course, have to wait for the many yet unpublished sources in the next volumes before making a final judgement.

From the very beginning, the outcome of the Synod was used as a basis for excluding from office pastors who thought and taught differently. The President of the Synod, Johannes Bogermann, expelled the Remonstrants from the Synod on January 14, 1619. From then on, they were not even allowed to participate in discussions or confirm that their views were being correctly presented. In the end, all participants ceremonially signed not only the Belgian Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, but also the resolutions of the Synod of Dordt.

The Grand Pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who had supported the Arminians, was sentenced to death and beheaded just a few days after the end of the Synod in May 1619. Surely it would be too easy to see his death as occurring purely as a result of his Remonstrant position. Moritz of Orange, who thus removed his adversary, was hardly interested in theology and the Calvinist position. The death penalty was imposed for treason, namely the attempt to deprive Moritz of power or to eliminate him. Nevertheless, the blending of the competition for power in the Netherlands with theological positions

shows that from the beginning there was more at stake than a friendly theological consensus.

In the aftermath of the Synod, after recognition of the results by the States General, about two hundred additional Arminian clergymen were removed from office and had to leave the Netherlands. The decisions of the Synod of Dordt had already been confirmed in France in 1620 by the National (Reformed) Synod of Alsace. Just six years after the Synod, in 1625, the Calvinists lost their most important patron through the death of the governor general Moritz of Orange. Nevertheless, the Canons of Dordt remained permanently preserved as a resolution of the Synod. At the same time, one important effect of the Synod was that henceforth the Heidelberg Catechism represented the extent of theological breadth of the Reformed Church. This is also an indication that the Synod promoted a confessional character.

The decision to formulate the Canons in a popular manner, neither scholastically nor academically, and hence to explain the consequences of each point for a practical life of faith has contributed to their popularity and survival.

Besides the victory over intra-church opposition and the short-term gain of international prestige for Moritz of Orange, the main historical effect of the Synod of Dordt was probably to clearly form the Reformed confession and make it visible alongside the Lutheran confessions. It also helped to make the Netherlands—especially after the collapse of the Electoral Palatinate in the Thirty Years' War and the loss of the Faculty of Theology in Heidelberg—the leading theological center of Calvinism.

The conflict that led to the Synod began in 1603–1604 as a dispute between two professors from Leiden, Jacobus Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus. In 1610, forty-three Arminian theologians wrote a remonstrance composed of five articles. The 'Gomarists' were therefore also called 'Anti-Arminians' and 'Contra-Remonstrants'.

Arminius (1560–1609) represented the view that God had decided to save all humans, but that only those who accepted salvation with individual faith would be saved. It was thus part of man's free will, in his view, that divine grace could be resisted. Gomarus (1565–1641) followed the view of Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, who had radicalized Calvin to a certain extent. According to Beza, God had determined before the fall of man—that is, before sin existed—who was saved and who was lost (supralapsarianism), and therefore he did so not out of mercy but out of sovereignty and omnipotence.

Governor Moritz of Orange, the head of the Dutch States General, passionately supported Gomarus. He arranged for a final decision in this dispute by a synod that had confirming the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as its object. The Remonstrants, headed by Leiden professor Simon Episcopius, explained their position to the foreign delegates and defended themselves before the Synod on short notice. However, they were expelled (in the fifty-seventh of the 154 meetings) after their refusal to submit to the resolutions of the Synod and to recognize its legality prior to knowing its results.

But if the condemnation of the position of Arminius had already been decided beforehand, it is surprising that Gomarus' counter-position found no majority at the Synod. Even though supralapsarianism's claim that election and condemnation preceded the creation and fall of man, thus being part of the sovereignty of God and not a consequence of his mercy, was not explicitly rejected in any Synod document, its advocates lost out as most of the foreign delegates were united in their opposition to Gomarus' position.



Especially to be mentioned among the foreign opponents of Gomarus are Mathias Martinius from Bremen as well as Georg Cruciger and Rudolph Goclenius from Hessen (more precisely from Marburg).

Infralapsarianism (i.e. that election and condemnation followed the creation and fall of man, thus arising above all from God's mercy) is presumed throughout the Synod, which thereby, rather than following the strict line of Gomarus and Beza, advanced Heinrich Bullinger's more moderate position. That is all the more astonishing as Gomarus himself was a member of the Synod and had Moritz of Orange's ear!

It is hoped that the publication of these documents will, by making key documents more readily accessible, encourage more detailed research on the Synod of Dordt. I would like to thank the publisher for making possible and supporting such a complicated, laborious and extensive undertaking.