

## 94. WAR AND VICTORY 1568 -1648

**W**e have come to the Eighty Years War of the Dutch forefathers against Roman Catholic tyranny. No, this was not a *revolutionary* war but a *faith* conflict. Some writers deny that, but they twist the facts of Dutch national history. We could mention many instances to prove it was indeed a faith conflict. We will give some explicit examples, which will be enough to show this.



Alva. Wikipedia.

Let us read what Alva wrote to King Philip II after he had been active in The Netherlands for some time. He wrote a long letter to his king. We will quote just one sentence. He wrote:

"The Dutch people are so patient and forbearing that whenever the king puts an end to our bloody dominion (which time has not yet come), and proclaims a general pardon, then the people will show themselves to be obedient just as easily as it now shows itself to be insubordinate."

This sentence says enough!

Another example:

When Alva had already left the Netherlands, the Spanish authorities told Spain that high taxes and the Spanish soldiers' cruel oppression had caused the Dutch people to rebel. Alva then wrote another letter to the king explaining the *actual* cause of the rebellion. He knew, because he had been there long enough! That second letter reads:

"Not the money, nor the military, but religion alone is the cause of the rebellion, and if we do not grant freedom of conscience to the rebels, they will never subject themselves."

This is clear language! It was *religion alone*! Alva understood very well why the Dutch people offered such desperate resistance!

So what was it all about?

*Not* resistance to *authority*, because that would have been a revolution, but to obtain the freedom to serve God as He commanded in His Word. To get that freedom, they had to forcefully oppose the bloody dominion that Alva imposed on them.

The man who wrote this was Alva the Iron Duke, who tried to subdue the Dutch 'heretics' with unscrupulous cruelty! These letters clearly show that the Eighty Years' War was not a *revolutionary war*, as alleged by Rome.

We repeat a line from the previous chapter:

After Haarlem had fallen, someone wrote to the Prince of Orange:

'If you haven't made a covenant with a powerful monarch, you may as well give up the struggle'.

His answer was:

**'I have made a firm covenant with the Potentate of all potentates.'** (Meaning God)

This answer clearly shows the conflict was all about freedom of religion!

Those forefathers sacrificed their property, blood and lives for the freedom to serve God as He requires it of us in the Bible.

And God was pleased to crown that battle of faith with a favourable outcome. The Lord has so often shown His favour to His people!

### THE EIGHTY-YEAR WAR WITH ALVA

We cannot discuss the entire Eighty Years' War because that belongs to national history. They are beautiful histories, but we must tell you a *few* things because church and national history are so closely connected.

Alva ruled the poor Netherlands — that Iron Duke, well-known for his harsh, pitiless cruelty. He was a zealous Roman Catholic, and according to him, all means were lawful to maintain the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

One of his first acts was to establish the '**Council of Unrest**'. That council had to end all the turmoil in that country. At first, Alva was the chairman of that council. The Council of Unrest began its work



**'Council of Unrest'**. This council was a special court of justice, set up by Alva in September 1567 to deal with the social unrest caused by the Iconoclasm. This council had a staff of 170 men and was extremely 'efficient'. Many nobles fled the country for fear of being caught. In the nine years of its existence some 15000 people were condemned to either death or banishment. Alva hired spies to find the 'rebels'. He paid them 7 nickles for reporting a 'traitor'. The people nicknamed those spies 'sevensnickelmen'.

with unmerciful cruelty. They pronounced *thousands* of death sentences.

The people soon had another name for that Council of Unrest. They called it **'The Council of Blood'**, and that name described it perfectly. It shed so much innocent blood!

Alva would have loved to arrest the Prince of Orange but failed. The Prince had fled to Germany and was safe in his ancestral castle, 'The Dillenburg'.

Alva tried to lure the Prince to The Netherlands with friendly letters. He wrote to Orange that he would have nothing to fear and would love to cooperate with him and many more such lies. He did this while he had the death warrant of the Prince in his pocket! How intensely wicked!

When that did not succeed, he arrested Egmont and Hoorn, and he had those two noblemen beheaded in 1568 at Brussels. The Judge of heaven and earth had judged Egmont for being a persecutor of the people of the Lord, as a man whose hands dripped with the blood of the children of God, but for Philip II and Alva, this sentence of Egmont was a shameful act! Egmont had *not* deserved that at the hand of his king because he had served him faithfully, *too* faithfully!

## BACKGROUND - THE POLITICAL SITUATION

Many Dutch people know the history of the beginning of that struggle. There were battles at Heiligerlee and Gemmingen. In the battle of Heiligerlee, Adolph, the youngest brother of the Prince, was killed. He gave his young life for freedom of religion. That campaign of Prince William failed miserably! God's ways are higher than ours and are often incomprehensible to us. But when everything *seemed* lost, and deliverance *seemed* impossible, *then* God arose and delivered His people. God often works through what *seems* impossible. How often hasn't the Lord used



*'..Prince William of Orange was safe in The Dillenburg'*

weather and wind to save the Netherlands from great distress? Was the North-western storm which brought the Sea Beggars to Den Briel accidental? No, God *ordered* that storm!

And what about the storms at the siege of Leiden? First, a north-western storm forced the seawater high up against the coast, and then a south-western storm brought the intruding waters as far as the walls of Leiden, which no one expected! Did all that happen accidentally?

In all these things, we may see the almighty hand of God and observe His miracles. It is impossible to relate all those miracles, for there are so many.

Remember the incredible story of the '**Armada**', proudly called the '**Invincible Armada**' by the Spaniards? God ordered heavy storms to smash that powerful fleet to bits on the coasts of Scotland!

There is a saying: 'Destroyed by the breath of God'. How true!

God has also intervened with other 'coincidences' during those eighty years.



*Frederick Henry, prince of Orange Nassou. Painter: Michiel van Miereveld.*

At the capture of Wesel in 1629, the governor Frederik Henry was besieging 's-Hertogenbosch. The first bullet the Spaniards shot at the Dutch soldiers hit the chain of their own drawbridge, which the Spaniards would not let down. That drawbridge was their safety! But that first bullet shot that heavy chain apart so the drawbridge plunged down, and the

Dutch soldiers could march into the city of Wesel. When a messenger brought that news to Governor Frederick Henry, he responded:

"O my son, is that how it happened? Then it was a work of God and not of man."

Even the Spaniards exclaimed:

"Weather and wind are the soldiers of the Beggars!" That was a testimony from the enemy!

*"Weather and wind are the soldiers of the Beggars!"*

At times the cause of liberty looked like it was losing because the struggle was so hard. Victories and defeats alternated. Prosperity and adversity followed each other. At times the distress rose so high that everything seemed lost, but then the Lord gave unexpected deliverance so that everything suddenly changed.

When the Spaniards cut off Holland (north) from Zeeland (south), it caused great dismay throughout the country, for it made the situation very

dangerous. But then the Spanish governor, Requesens, suddenly died, which averted the threat. The Spanish troops mutinied and left the south islands of Zeeland they had conquered at the cost of so much blood. Indeed, it's not surprising that the enemy exclaimed:

*"God has become a Beggar!"*

When in 1584, the Prince of Orange, who had received the honourable name of "Father of the Fatherland", collapsed and died at the hands of a murderer, Spain and Rome rejoiced as they believed the Dutch would now stop fighting. Their leader, the Prince, was dead! But they rejoiced too soon because *God was not* dead! *He* was still alive! *He* gave others to continue the work of 'Father William'. The names of Prince Maurice and Frederick Henry are well-known in Dutch history!

Finally, in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia was signed, and The Netherlands was completely independent from Spain. Who would have ever imagined that? That little country, The Netherlands, had joined battle with the world empire of Spain and - had gained the victory!

During the war, The Netherlands had become rich and powerful, while wealthy Spain had become impoverished and was no longer a world power. Indeed, if the Almighty had not assisted the Dutch,



*Luis de Requesens. The governor who replaced Alva. Wikipedia.*

they would have perished long ago. Their history is full of God's miracles. This section is national history, but because it is so entwined with the history of the Church of the Lord, we had to explain a bit about the political situation.

It is a miracle of God's omnipotence that the Dutch emerged victoriously from that desperate struggle. God, the Lord, reigns!

### MARNIX OF ST. ALDEGONDE

Let us now return to church history.

By God's miraculous work, Roman Catholic Spain did not manage to destroy the Dutch churches in those dark days of persecution. Though badly persecuted and oppressed, the various congregations continued to exist. That had a lot to do with the consistories who governed those congregations.

We know that besides the Alliance of the Nobles in 1566, there was also an Alliance of Consistories. When the alliance of nobles dissolved due to the Iconoclasm, the Alliance of Consistories continued to exist. But apart from that, those consistories stood alone, and more unity was necessary. The various consistories needed to start supporting each other. The man who especially urged unity and cooperation was Marnix of St. Aldegonde. He came from an ancient noble family and was born in Brussels. First, he studied at Louvain and later at the university in Geneva, where Calvin and his successor Theodore Beza were his teachers. He joined the Calvinists and became very influential. Marnix was one of the nobles who presented Margaret of Parma with the Petition and, according to some writers, was the man who insisted on getting the Petition drawn up.

Marnix fled to Germany when Alva came, like Prince William of Orange. He became friends with Orange and became his best co-worker. In 1573 he was arrested and imprisoned by his enemies, but Orange succeeded in exchanging him for Bossu, a Spaniard whom the Dutch had captured and imprisoned in the battle of the Zuider Zee. Marnix is most likely the author of the Dutch national anthem, 'Het Wilhelmus'.

He also rhymed the psalms, but the churches have never accepted these. The psalm rhyming of Datheen, the so-called Old Rhyme, was too well-loved by the people.

After the murder of the Prince of Orange, his son Maurice continued with his father's work, and the friendship between the house of Orange and Marnix of St. Aldegonde continued.

Marnix of St. Aldegonde was an excellent linguist. That's why the government asked him to translate the Bible into Dutch from the original languages. That was a tremendous task. He accepted that honourable commission, and full of courage, he began working on it. Alas, other activities constantly interrupted and delayed this work. He finished translating Genesis, but when he was about to start with Exodus, he suddenly died in 1598.



*Marnix of St  
Aldegonde, Painting by  
Hendrik Bary*

This Marnix of St. Aldegonde realised very well that unity and cooperation between consistories were essential. Otherwise, the danger of confusion and disunity would threaten.

There were two kinds of congregations. The first group were the refugee congregations. The people who had fled for their life to safer regions had established these. Upon arriving, they looked for each other and instituted congregations.

After leaving Geneva, Calvin ministered to a French refugee congregation in Strasbourg for some years. John Knox, the great reformer of Scotland, also served an English refugee congregation founded in the German city of Frankfurt-on-Main for some time. There were numerous Dutch refugee congregations in Germany.

The second group were the 'Churches under the Cross'. During the most violent persecutions, they continued to hold religious services in their homes. Danger and death loomed and threatened constantly, but they persevered. Through betrayal and other circumstances, Rome regularly arrested and imprisoned members of these churches and publicly or secretly put them to death after severely torturing them. But those who were left did not flee; they remained at their post and continued the work. That's why they added 'Under the Cross' to their name. Sometimes those two groups of churches corresponded; the churches 'Under the Cross' sometimes asked each other for advice, but it was tough. It wasn't easy to support and help each other with word and deed. So when a congregation struggled with a problem case, every consistory decided how best to deal with it by themselves.

#### THE CONVENTION OF WESEL, THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH-ORDER

Marnix of St. Aldegonde visited or wrote to various ministers to meet at a specific place and discuss the state of affairs. Naturally, that meeting could not be held in The Netherlands because, due to the raging persecution by Alva, that was impossible. They decided to meet in the German city of Wesel. A conference took place there in 1568.

No, it was *not* a synod, a lawful ecclesiastical meeting, because the churches had not delegated those present. Everyone came personally without having been sent by his church. That's why we do

not speak of the 'Synod at Wesel' but the 'Convention at Wesel'.

This convention has been of great importance.

Peter Dathenus, the well-known field preacher and the man of the old rhymed version of Psalms, was probably the chairman at that meeting. At that Convention at Wesel, they discussed a *church order*. They must agree on rules to maintain good harmony. That is true for society, as well as the church. Sooner or later, a bond of churches without a Church Order will lose its unity.

At Wesel, they discussed the administration of the church and how to act in specific cases. They discussed doctrine and the confessions. Also, how necessary it is to have unity regarding these matters. They could not make decisions because they were not lawfully delegated, but they laid the foundation for the administration of the churches.

After they returned home, they told their congregations what had been discussed and asked if the consistories would act according to the proposals and discussions at the Convention at Wesel.

Marnix of St. Aldegonde thought: 'We must hold such a meeting again' and began organising. 'But we must do it differently than before', he decided. 'The consistories of the congregations must now delegate particular people from their midst to go there. Then this second meeting will become a lawful ecclesiastical meeting with the power to make decisions.'



Wesel (West Germany) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Public domain)

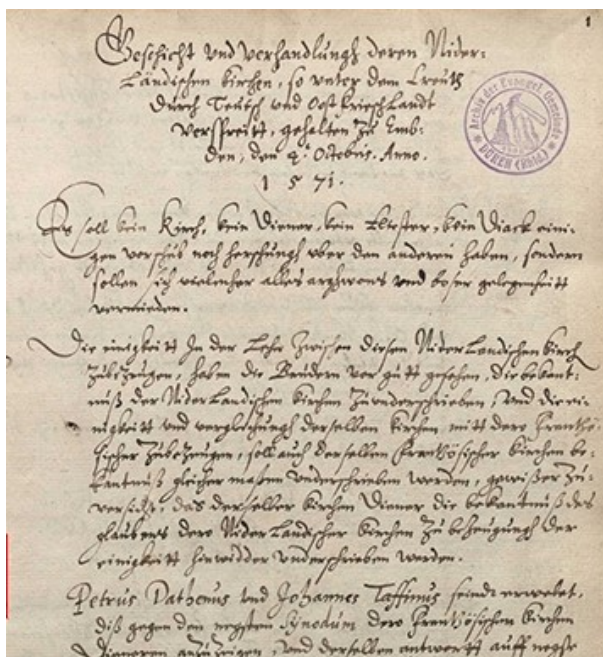
## THE SYNOD OF EMBDEN

Marnix of St. Aldegonde invited French, German, English and Dutch churches to participate in this meeting. He asked them to send delegates to represent the church that sent them. This time, they decided to meet in the German city of Embden in October 1571. They had carefully chosen this specific date. It was the time of the annual fair at Embden, so the city was full of hustle and bustle. People travelled from all over to enjoy the festivities. Nobody would notice a few more strangers when the city was full of them! Nobody could know whether they came for the fair or another reason. So, unnoticed and without causing any suspicion, the synod could convene. It was not a large synod. Travelling then was too dangerous and challenging, especially for synod delegates. There were only 29 delegates present from the various churches. But again, the big difference with the meeting of Wesel three years ago was that the churches had *delegated* these people! The fact that they represented their churches was of great importance.

There were 29 French, German and Dutch delegates. The English Church had also been invited but had not sent representatives. That was a pity!



*The building where the first Synod of Embden was held. (4<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1571.)*



*The acts of the synod in Embden 1571*

This synod of Embden has been very important. They discussed doctrine and the confessions. The Heidelberg Catechism, written by Casper Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus, and Geneva's Catechism were approved. Everyone put their signature to The Belgic Confession of Faith, written by Guido de Bres. They also drafted a Church Order, agreeing on many important rules regarding church life and relationships.

The Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical form of government; this means that the pope is the head of the whole church. But there would be *no* hierarchy in the Reformed Churches. One congregation may not rule over another. One minister may not lord it over another. Whether they served a large or small congregation, it makes no difference. How wise our fathers have been!

How easy is it for a preacher of a large congregation to exalt himself?! That little devil of pride is far from being dead. That's how hierarchy began in the Roman Catholic Church! (bishops, archbishops, patriarchs, etc.) By accepting the Church Order, the men of the Reformation ensured they would not repeat *that* mistake!

But they made even more decisions at the Synod of Embden.

Various congregations in the same area would form a *classis*, which must meet every three or six months. Then the delegates of only those congregations would meet together.

*Provincial* synods would also come together once a year. And once every two years, a *general* synod would meet. In that way, the consistories of the various congregations, from larger or smaller areas, could hold conferences.

The Church Order drawn up at that synod of Embden is still mostly the same today. Some articles received some practical changes, but the Reformed churches upheld all the main rules they made then. We all know the churches hold *classis* meetings regularly. The church magazines often report on churches coming together in *classis* or synod meetings.

This section was a bit difficult, but we must know something about these things.

God Himself watched over His Church so that it did not perish in those dark days. Despite the

bloody persecutions and the daily perils of life, God gave those people the courage and strength to persevere. He gave them the desire to travel to Embden to discuss the congregation's best interests with each other. You may be sure they prayed to the Lord for relief and deliverance out of their great distress. And God heard and answered those prayers. He gave deliverance.

Several months later, in April 1572, the Sea Beggars captured Den Briel. Many would have shaken their heads beforehand, thinking:

"That won't happen; it will fail again.

So far, every attempt has failed!"

Alva thought the same because he scornfully said: "No es nada!"

That means, "It is nothing."

But he did not say that several months later, for soon after, the people revolted against the Spanish tyranny. Many cities drove the Spanish soldiers away and declared they favoured the Prince. Three years later, they even held the next synod on Dutch soil at Dordrecht. And in the following years, they held synods on Dutch territory wherever they could meet quietly and undisturbed. Who could have dared to hope for that?

### A THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE FOR LEIDEN!

We must tell you one more important event.

Young men who wanted to study for the ministry always had to go abroad because that was where the universities were. Many studied at the University of Wittenberg, but even more at the University of Geneva. But in 1575, The Netherlands received its own university.

National history tells us that Leiden was besieged in 1574. Food soon ran out, and the people got hungry. As it worsened, this resulted in an outbreak of pestilence, which claimed hundreds of lives, but the people of Leiden persevered. When the distress had reached extreme levels, God granted deliverance. Fierce storms pushed the water levels so high that they reached Leiden's walls, forcing the besiegers to break up the siege, thereby releasing Leiden from its suffering.



*The fall of Den Briel, 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1572 (J.H. Keller, 1759)*

Although the pestilence still raged, the Prince of Orange visited the city. He wanted to shake hands with those brave defenders. To reward their heroic endurance, the Prince granted a university to Leiden that same year. Now theological students need no longer go to Geneva to study but could remain in the Netherlands and pursue their studies in Leiden.

We could tell many more stories. The founding of the Union of Utrecht in 1579 by John the Elder,

brother of the Prince, has also been an act with far-reaching consequences.

Another significant act of the Dutch occurred when they renounced King Philip II of Spain, which permanently broke the bond uniting The Netherlands with Spain. This renunciation was not an act of *revolt* but *obedience* to God's commands. The forefathers did not aim to oppose or reject authority, but they would and could no longer acknowledge the crowned murderer as



**The self sacrifice of the Mayor of Leiden, Pieter van der Werff.** A riot broke out in Leiden on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1574. The hungry and desperate people asked the city council for bread or surrender. The Mayor Pieter Adriaansz. van der Werff spoke the famous words: "I don't have food, but I know I have to die sometime. Then when you have been helped by my death, put your hands on this body, cut it up and divide it as far as possible. I am then comforted".

It is estimated that 6,000 people died out of the 15,000 that were inside the city. Starvation was a major cause of death, but also diseases such as the plague and dysentery spread rapidly among the weakened population.

To add to the trouble, they were short of beer, so people were forced to drink foul canal water. The citizens became increasingly discontented. However, they knew that the Spaniards would massacre the population if they got into the city!

(In real size, this painting is 4mtr high by 6 mtr wide).

their lawful ruler. They would never have renounced Philip II if he had given the people the liberty to serve God according to *His* laws and institutions. To quote Alva once more:

*"It was religion alone which drove them to that act."*

This chapter clearly shows that the Lord was pleased to crown the perseverance and struggle of the Dutch with *His* blessing. The attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to extinguish the light of the Reformation in The Netherlands failed! What a defeat for the prince of darkness! The bloody sacrifices were not in vain because the Dutch still reap the fruits of that faithful and courageous struggle.

Do we still understand and appreciate the precious liberty obtained at such an enormous cost? The increasing *indifference* proves the opposite! Has God helped out so often in such a marvellous way for *nothing*?

What will our answer be when He calls *us* to account?



*University of Leiden. This building was donated by William of Orange in 1575 and financed with possessions confiscated from Roman Catholics.*

## QUESTIONS

1. Why can we say that the resistance of the Dutch was not a revolution?
2. What was the purpose of this resistance?
3. Describe the rule of Alva.
4. What was the Council of Unrest? What did the people call this council?
5. How did God frequently intervene to save His people from their distress?

6. What did the enemy mean when they said: "Weather and wind are the soldiers of the Beggars"?
7. Show one other way in which the Lord gave unexpected deliverance.
8. How did the Prince of Orange die?
9. List one provision of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.
10. Identify Marnix of St. Aldegonde.
11. What is meant by a 'refugee' congregation?
12. What is meant by a 'Church under the Cross'?
13. Why was a conference held in Wesel in 1568?
14. How did this conference differ from a synod?
15. List the results of this convention.
16. How did the synod of Embden convene without causing suspicion?
17. List the results of this synod, including the following categories:
  - a. Heidelberg Catechism
  - b. Confession of Faith
  - c. Church Order
  - d. Church hierarchy
  - e. Classis and provincial synods; general synods
18. How did Leiden receive a university?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What is the difference between a revolution and a conflict of faith?
2. Prove from this section that the Lord often works in ways that are impossible for man.
3. Give an example from God's Word to prove that the Lord often uses wind and weather to deliver His people.
4. What is the difference between a general and provincial synod? What type of synods do we have in our country today?