

97. THE IMPORTANT SYNOD OF DORDT.

November 1618.¹

It is busy in Dordt, and more visitors are steadily entering the city. From all parts of the country, people travel to the ancient town on the Merwede River. There are also foreigners among those visitors. The hotels are fully booked, but thankfully many find accommodation with the local citizens. Why do so many people come



The Church in Dordt where they opened and closed the synod. The debates took place in a different building.

together in Dordt?... Just ask anyone living in Dordt, they will tell you. The long awaited 'National Synod' will finally be held there.

That synod will decide who is right, the Remonstrants or the Counter-Remonstrants. This assembly will decide whether salvation is by grace alone, or whether man, by his good works, can add to it. For many years, a fierce struggle has been fought over this teaching. This topic generated many disputes, divisions, and much confusion throughout The Netherlands. But finally, the synod is about to convene. Wonderful!

The Dutch Churches sent invitations to the foreign churches in Germany, England, Switzerland, and France. Matters on the agenda are so important that foreign churches are invited to participate in the discussions. That's why various foreigners

have come to Dordt. They are the delegates from the churches in Germany, Switzerland, and England.

But what about the churches in France? They were invited too, weren't they? That's true, and the French Huguenots would have loved to have been there. They had fully intended to come. But at the last moment, the French king refuses to allow those delegates to travel to Holland. The French Royal House is still very hostile toward the Huguenots. Sad, but there was nothing they can do about it. They do not dare to publicly defy the command of the king.

Travelling in those days was not as easy as it is today, but finally everyone is present.

On the 13th of November 1618, the synod is officially opened. Altogether there are more than one hundred delegates from the various churches. Additionally, eighteen government representatives are present. Their presence shows that the Dutch churches are not free from government interference either.

Let us enter the large hall where the synod meets. On the left and right benches sit the representatives of the government and the various churches. Around a large table in the centre sit the delegates of the Remonstrants. Of course, they also received an invitation to attend this synod. It is their doctrine which will be examined in the light of God's Word. They have to be allowed to explain and defend their point of view.

SYNOD BEGINS

The God-fearing minister Johannes Bogerman is chosen as chairman of this important synod. He was a minister in Leeuwarden. His father was a preacher as well, and he allowed his son to study. John Bogerman had studied at seven different universities, including ones in other countries.

¹ A short video about the synod is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdSvuaUTgxw>

This very competent man is elected to be chairman.



The main hall where the discussions took place.

The synod has a full agenda. Many matters need their urgent attention. No National Synod has been held since 1586, so more than thirty years ago. Could we possibly tell you everything that was discussed at that synod? ... No way, that is impossible. That would be a book on its own. And indeed, all those discussions are recorded in a big book: the Acts of the Synod of Dort. We will just share the main points and keep it simple; otherwise, it gets too complicated, and that is not necessary.

The main item on the agenda at that synod was the doctrines and the errors of the Remonstrants. (For more details on that see chapter 95/96).

After the synod opens and discussions are underway, several Remonstrant preachers enter the hall. They are the Remonstrant delegates. The discussions end, and it becomes quiet. At the front of the Remonstrant delegates walks their leader Episcopius. They take place at the big table in the centre. Their entire attitude clearly shows that they are present against their wishes; they



Johannes Bogerman 1576 – 1637

sense and realise that they are fighting a lost cause.

They had hoped to get their way by force; this was also

Oldenbarnevelt's intention. He

even wanted to involve the army, remember? But Oldenbarnevelt is in prison, awaiting trial. He is unable to assist them, and using force is now out of the question. Their doctrine is to be examined in the light of Scripture. The Remonstrants try hard to frustrate this procedure. Time and again their spokesman, Episcopius, would give an offensive speech.

He accuses the government. He accuses the church. He says this synod is no good and has no right to judge their doctrine—and so on. This continues for days on end!

THINGS COME TO A HEAD

With endless patience, the chairman Rev Bogerman tries to persuade them to cooperate and not obstruct standard synod procedures. But every effort fails, for the Remonstrants will not listen. They insist on having it *their* way. But that is not allowed, for that would destroy God's church in the Netherlands. Then the long and severe struggle of the Great Reformation would have been fought in vain.

Whatever Bogerman tries, it doesn't help. The Remonstrants continue to challenge, harass, resist, blame, all to obstruct the proceedings endlessly. They intend to make it impossible for this synod even to commence their work. They bring up all sorts of red herrings to obstruct synod procedures—anything to stop synod from examining their doctrine.

Eventually the chairman's patience runs out. He rebukes them for their hostile attitude. In righteous and passionate indignation, he explodes:

"You have refused to listen to us. You deliberately provoke us endlessly. You lie and mislead. Therefore, you are no longer welcome here. You are expelled. Go away! ... GO! ... GO!!!"

Those last words he roars at them. His finger points to the door; his patience at an end. He trembles with anger and indignation.

The Remonstrants must obey. They leave.

This outburst of Bogerman is eagerly used by the enemies of the pure doctrine to put the matter

unfairly and incorrectly in a wrong light. According to them, this depicted the spirit of the synod, etc, etc. But they conveniently ignore the reason for this outburst. They would rather not talk about the provocative behaviour of the Remonstrant delegates who *purposefully* tried to make the work of synod impossible. It is told as if the Remonstrants suffered a great injustice. Fortunately, we know better.

THE FIRST AGENDA ITEM

With the Remonstrant delegates gone, the remaining delegates can now examine their doctrine from their writings and compare them with Scripture. And that happens. For weeks they discuss and study it. The result of this comprehensive work is that the synod unanimously rejects the Arminian doctrine of the Remonstrants. No one agrees with their unscriptural theses. The church reaffirms the ancient, pure doctrine of salvation. At that synod they formulate the Canons of Dordt, also called



Kloveniersdoelen, taken shortly before its demolition in 1857. All the main discussions were held in this building.

'The Five Articles against the Remonstrants'. Together with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism these Canons of Dordt became 'The Three Forms of Unity'. Whatever the enemies may say, they must admit that the synod has condemned and rejected the doctrine of the Remonstrants *unanimously!*

Synod correctly decides that Remonstrant ministers are no longer allowed to preach. This decision prevents them from further destroying God's Church. Yet those ministers are not stripped

from their stipend. On the contrary, they and their families continue to be provided for, on the condition that they must subscribe to the '*Act of Cessation*'. In simple terms: they must promise that from now on, they will no longer preach. Those who accept receive an annual pension from which they and their families can live.

Yet some Remonstrant ministers stubbornly refuse to accept this condition. Those ministers are banished from the country.

However, Remonstrant beliefs continue to exist. In 1619 they establish a society in Antwerp called the 'Remonstrant Brotherhood'. After the death of Prince Maurice, many Remonstrants gradually return to the Netherlands. Eventually, they even establish a university in Amsterdam, where they train their ministers. Remonstrants still maintain a vibrant existence today. But the synod of Dordt put an end to their destructive influence in the Reformed churches.

This history clearly shows how dangerous the attacks of the devil are on God's Church, but it also shows that the Lord watches over His Church. The gates of hell cannot prevail against her.

OTHER AGENDA ITEMS

We mentioned that the main agenda item was the doctrine of the Remonstrants. But that is not the only item. Much more is discussed at this synod. The church liturgy is adopted as well.

Liturgy!

A difficult word - do you know what is meant by that? They are the different forms we have all heard the minister read at times. When babies, or sometimes also adults, are baptised, the form for Holy Baptism is read. There is also a form for the Lord's Supper. There are also forms for marriage, ordination of ministers, elders and deacons and others. They are printed in the back of your Book of Praise. Check it out! All these forms are discussed and adopted at the synod of Dordt and are still used today.

CHURCH ORDER

The 'Church Order of Dordt' is also written and adopted. In church life, good order and harmony must exist. That counts for society too, doesn't it? God gives us the authorities, the government. When we disobey the authorities, we may encounter the police and the courts. It is good that there *is* a government! The government must protect what is right and punish what is wrong. Likewise, there must be order in God's Church. No church member may do what is good in their own eyes. No way, for this would create chaos in Christ's Church and would be displeasing to the LORD. This Church Order stipulates how all things must be done decently and in good order. If someone causes trouble in a congregation, he or she will be put under church discipline.

MISSION

Do you know what else they discussed at the synod? They also thought about the best way to proclaim God's Word among the heathens. They discussed *mission* work. Our forefathers recognised the importance of mission work. Yes, they acknowledge the church's calling and duty to proclaim the gospel to the heathens. At the end of this book, we hope to tell you more about mission work, so we can be brief.

During the Eighty Years' War, the Netherlands acquired vast colonies in East India. Millions of pagans and Mohammedans lived there. They now came under Dutch rule. The church felt responsible for those millions of people. Therefore, the synod decides that a seminary must be established; a school where ministers can train to be missionaries in India. Obviously, they will need to understand and speak the native language. This seminary in the city of Leiden trains future missionaries in the local languages of the East Indian people. Language is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome. We'll hear more about this later.

At times people speak quite negatively about this issue. They say that the Dutch only used their colonies in East India to make a lot of money. But that is only partly true. Mission work has cost

thousands and thousands of dollars. At that time no other country did as much for mission work as the Netherlands.

Just a few examples to illustrate this:

In 1647, 28 missionaries plus additional staff worked in East India. In one year alone, 1693, the East India Company donated 29000 guilders for mission work on the island of Ambon. More could be said about this.

That labour bore fruit. In 1772 East India counted half a million Christians.

Later that seminary was transferred to Ceylon, an island in the Indian Ocean, and it existed till 1795.

SYNOD OF DORDT AND BIBLE TRANSLATION.

An important item on the agenda is Bible translation. True, there are translations, but they are no longer satisfactory. We previously mentioned the Waldenses in France, John Wycliffe in England and others who translated parts of the Bible. The synod discusses their options. They all agree that changes have to be made. But how? One option is to improve existing translations.

However, they decide that the entire Bible needs to be translated from the original text. The Old Testament is mainly written in the Hebrew language. Due to Babylonian influence, some books were written in the Chaldean language. The New Testament was written in Greek, the common language at that time. Synod decides the Bible must be re-translated from these original texts. This happens.

Various qualified ministers are appointed to commence that gigantic task and to complete it with God's help. Rev Bogerman becomes chairman of the translating committee.

For years they are busy with this task. Leiden is their base. Each day, before commencing, the translators ask the Lord for wisdom and strength, because it is such a difficult task. It is not just any book, but the Word of the Lord! Carefully and conscientiously, they translate phrase by phrase and word by word.

THE TRANSLATORS & THE EPIDEMIC

While the translators are busy in Leiden, a terrible plague begins to spread in that city. More than 20,000 people die from that contagious disease. At times one hundred a day. It becomes extremely dangerous for them to remain in Leiden because the translators can also easily become infected with that contagious disease. Will it not be better to postpone the work?

What must they do?

Remain, or meet in another city where the dangerous plague does not exist? But this poses difficulties as well. It is not easy to come to a decision. Then they kneel before the Lord to ask for His advice. After that prayer, they unanimously decide to remain in Leiden. Doesn't the Lord control sickness and health, life, and death? The Lord can protect them from that terrible disease. And?

The Lord doesn't not put their faith to shame. Not one of those translators dies from the pestilence, yes, even more, not one of them is even affected by it. Quietly and undisturbed, they can continue that important work. God watches over them and cares for them.

In 1635 they finish the translation of the Bible. Then it still must be printed. This takes it's time as well as they didn't have our modern printing devices. But in 1637 it is all done. The first copy is



The first 'Staten Bible' was printed in 1637

bound in a beautiful velvet cover and presented to the government. For years that Authorized Version of the Bible was used at their meetings. If only they still did this today!

Because the government (States General) had authorised the translation and paid all the

expenses, the new translation was called 'The States Bible' or 'States Translation'. This translation is still in use today. The Lord was pleased to crown that work with His blessing. For centuries, hundreds, thousands, even millions have used that States Bible. Its words have encouraged and comforted many in the trials of life. With it God instructed His people. The Holy Spirit has sanctified that Word to the hearts of many.

CLOSING OF SYNOD

Altogether the Synod of Dordt met 180 times. There was so much to discuss. Part of these discussions was about education. Our forefathers realised the great importance of reformed education. God's kingdom is served through proper education. For many, the privilege of good education provided a decisive outcome for later life. Finally, after a solemn closing, the various delegates all went home.

The Reformed church did not come under state supervision with regards to her doctrine, something the Remonstrants wanted. The local governments had limited influence only, for instance, in calling a minister and other practical matters.

We could finish the chapter here. Yet we briefly want to tell you one more thing because it is important.

Not long after the Synod of Dordt, another intense conflict broke out in the churches. This time it was not about the doctrine of the Remonstrants, but about observing the Sunday, the Lord's Day.

The fourth commandment reads, 'Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy!' However, some ministers stood up and said: 'This command is only for the Jews who lived before the coming of Christ. That fourth commandment is only for the Old Testament church and does not apply to us.' They teach that the fourth commandment has been fulfilled in Christ in the same way the sacrificial laws were fulfilled.

The main minister who taught that was Rev Johannes Coccejus. All his followers were called Coccians.

Others strongly disagree with the Coccians. They say:

“No, the fourth commandment applies to us as much as the other nine commandments of the law of the Lord,” and they are entirely correct. If one of the ten commandments only applies to the old Testament, why aren't the other nine? True, we no longer observe the Jewish Sabbath, which falls on our Saturday; instead, we have the Sunday, which is the day of Christ's resurrection. But the Sabbath in the Old Testament and our Sunday in the New Testament are the same. God instituted both as days of rest. Both are 'The day of the Lord'.

Especially Gisbertus Voetius, professor at Utrecht, defended and fought for that truth. All his followers were called 'Voetians'. The conflict between the Voetians and the Coccians lasted for years. The Coccian church members went to work in the fields as usual on Sunday, while the Voetians honoured the whole day as the day of the Lord! How much hatred and envy were sown in many hearts by those disputes. How much division this caused in the congregations, among relatives and even in the families.
Strife again!

Confusion again!

Will it never end?



Rev Johannes Coccejus 1603-1669 (66yrs)



Rev. Gisbertus Voetius. 1586 – 1676 (87 Yrs)

No, we may not count on that. The war between Christ and Satan remains until the end of the world.

Yet Voetius was right! The day of the Lord must be observed. We need not bring sacrifices anymore as the Jews did. But that day must be sanctified because God commanded it in His law, and all non-essential work may not be done on that day. Nowadays Sundays are used for outings or sport. The Lord didn't create the day of rest for that purpose. For us, the command of the Lord continues to apply: 'Remember the Sabbath Day, (Sunday) to keep it *holy!*'

QUESTION

1. What was the significance of the Synod of Dordt?
2. Why were foreigners invited to this synod?
3. Why were French delegates absent?
4. Identify John Bogerman.
5. Identify Episcopius.
6. How did the Remonstrants conduct themselves at the synod?
7. Why did Bogerman become angry? What was the result?
8. What was the primary purpose of the Canons of Dordt?

9. What conclusion did the synod reach regarding Remonstrant doctrine?
10. What conclusion did the synod reach regarding Remonstrant preachers?
11. What was the 'Remonstrant Brotherhood'?
12. Identify the term 'liturgy.' What was done concerning this?
13. What was the Church Order of Dordt?
14. What decisions were made concerning mission work? Where was mission work conducted?
15. What decisions were made regarding the translation of the Bible?
16. Who was involved in this translation endeavour? What was the new translation called?
17. Identify Coccejus.
18. What did Coccejus teach concerning the Sabbath?
19. What did Gisbertus Voetius teach concerning this? Who was Voetius? 20. Why must Sunday be hallowed?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Isaiah 58:13 very carefully. What does the Lord say in this verse regarding the Sabbath? Be sure to explain it in your own words! How can this verse serve as a guideline for our activities on Sunday?
2. List the five heads of doctrine included in the Canons of Dordt.