Henk van den Belt /
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A Landmark in Turbulent Times

The Meaning and Relevance of the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)

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Henk van den Belt, Klaas-Willem de Jong, Willem van Vlastuin

Introduction

In 1618 and 1619 the Synod of Dordt was held, upon the authority of the States-General of the Dutch Republic, to resolve a conflict within the Reformed Church in the Netherlands about the doctrine of predestination. Although the roots of this conflict go further back, it became particularly visible in a dispute which had arisen within Leiden's theological faculty in 1602. The synod was intended to re-establish the unity of the young state of the United Provinces in a crucial stage of the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), which was part of the broader confrontation between Catholic and Protestant powers in Europe after the Reformation. Both goals were achieved in the presence of congenial foreign theologians from friendly states, while other ecclesiastical questions were then decided by the synod with only the Dutch delegates present.

In the past two decades much research has been done on Reformed orthodoxy in general and the theology of Dordt in particular. An example of the first category is the bilingual publication of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae (Synopsis of Purer Theology)* (2014, 2016, 2020). An example of the second category is the publication of the *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)* (2015, 2017). The republication of these classically Reformed sources went hand in hand with new research into the history and theology of Dordt (Milton: 2005; Goudriaan and van Lieburg: 2011; van der Pol: 2018; de Young: 2019; Godfrey: 2019; van Lieburg: 2019; Beeke and Klauber: 2020). As a counterpart to the interest in Dordt, new attention has also been paid to Jacobus Arminius (1560- 1609) (Stanglin: 2007 and den Boer: 2010).

In the context of this interest in the history, the theology and the ecclesiology of Dordt, several international conferences were held in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Synod. Contributions from two of these conferences, namely in Dordrecht (2018) and Groningen (2019), have been collected in this volume. The conference in Dordrecht was prepared by a committee in which Fred van Lieburg played an important and stimulating role, and we are thankful for his efforts to commemorate the Synod academically.

In recent decades not much has been published about the Church Order, which the Synod of Dordt established on May 28, 1619. Much research was done earlier, in particular between 1880 and 1940 by scholars such as F.L. Rutgers (1836–1917) and H. Bouwman (1863–1933). On the basis of this research, various commentaries were released, some of which are still authoritative. However, a thorough study of

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the history of the Dordt Church Order (DCO) and its predecessors did not yet exist. Anja van Harten-Tip filled this gap with the dissertation she defended in 2018 (Van Harten-Tip: 2018). In the field of Reformed church polity, especially in regard to the Dordt Church Order, the diversity of publications in the past decades is particularly striking. On the one hand, there are denominations and theologians who, out of a deeply rooted conviction, want to remain as close as possible to the original text of the Church Order. However, the practices are very diverse, as the recent Dutch handbook illustrates (Selderhuis: 2019, 8, 186–206). This handbook deals more with church polity in the Dordtian tradition than with the DCO itself and its proper explanation. On the other hand, there are those who do not want to deny the historical connection with the DCO and who recognize its historical and even principled value, but they believe that, in line with Reformed polity principles against the background of changing contexts, new approaches should be considered. A good example of this is the conference held in Utrecht in 2011 under the title, 'Protestant Church Polity in Changing Contexts' (Janssen and Koffeman: 2014; Koffeman and Smit: 2014).

A. Diverse Contexts

This new volume places the Synod of Dordt in a broad variety of contexts. From the ecclesial perspective, the synod can be seen as a Protestant attempt to organize an ecumenical council, an international assembly of all the Reformed churches. In the first chapter, Alec Ryrie compares the Synod to the historic model of ecumenical councils. It indeed had many of the characteristics of a Reformed General Council and was seen by some contemporaries in that light. This helps to explain the enduring international authority not only of the Canons and the Church Order, but also of its rulings on slavery which led to a delay of the emancipation of slaves in the Dutch empire. Ryrie, however, concludes that the synod failed to function in this conciliar role and illustrates that general councils are incompatible with Protestant church structures.

How did the delegates themselves understand their role? Polly Ha explores the synod's debates about its conciliar authority. Conflicting views over its purpose and nature had already surfaced before the synod began. The Remonstrants and the Contra-Remonstrants were divided over the nature of ecclesiastical liberty and jurisdiction, not only regarding toleration of diversity and the role of the civil magistrate, but also with respect to the very nature of the church itself. In her chapter, Ha also reflects on arguments over conciliar authority which developed after the synod, for instance in the Leiden *Synopsis of Purer Theology* (1625).

The historical and political context of the synod is that of Early Modern confessionalization. Fred van Lieburg highlights the public sphere in which the Synod of

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Dordt received its authority and influence. In order to re-establish peace and unity in the Dutch Republic's church and society, the States General provided that the general public could have free access to the great assembly, making this possible by two galleries in the hall where the synod gathered. Popular interest and national tourism were stimulated by the appearance of name lists, prints and reports in pamphlets. Besides, publicity was challenged by negative reactions of Roman-Catholic and Arminian visitors to the synod, reputation damage by the president's emotional dismissal of the cited Remonstrants from the scene, and risks of misinformation about the doctrinal deliberations among the delegates. After a phase of mainly private sessions, the final presentation of the synod's results was completely public, as were the written results in several languages. Without the open policy, state restoration and church reform would have missed their goal.

With regards to the international political context, the influence of the civil authorities was not only prominent in the Dutch Republic. In 1618, King James I (1566–1625) let the States General know that he would not accept an official representation by the Dutch churches in England, and contrary to their expectations, these Dutch churches in England were not invited to the synod, notwithstanding their strong Contra-Remonstrant position. Ole Peter Grell shows how the leaders of the Anglo-Dutch communities expected an invitation and even selected three delegates, but in the end were only represented by a single observer. They were deeply disappointed, because they considered themselves to be the mother church of the Dutch Reformed and had provided financial, military and religious support for the Dutch Revolt. The Anglo-Dutch churches, however, stood under the authority of the English government and could not participate in or accept decrees of the Dutch national synods without its consent.

Jacob van Sluis reflects on the synod's academic context, not from the perspective of Leiden University, the nursery of Arminianism, but of the Frisian University of Franeker, a stronghold of Contra–Remonstrant orthodoxy. Sibrandus Lubbertus (c.1555–1625) was a fierce opponent of Arminius, and after the Synod, president Johannes Bogerman (1576–1637) and his advisor William Ames (1576–1633) were appointed as professors. These three professors, however, were not able to impose a strict discipline on students as a practical further reformation, in line with the Reformed doctrines formulated at the synod.

Before the volume turns to the theological issues debated at the synod itself, two chapters place Dordt in the broader theological context. The doctrinal discussions on the doctrines of grace are rooted in the debates between Augustine and Pelagius. It is interesting that the church father John Chrysostom is mentioned and not considered a Semi-Pelagian, as Jeannette Kreijkes argues from the *Acta.* John Calvin was sometimes more critical of Chrysostom's position in this respect. In any case it is important to avoid anachronism and to realize that the relation between grace and human freedom was not yet a matter of controversy in Chrysostom's time.

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Harm Goris places the theology of Dordt against the medieval context. The Synod holds a pessimistic view of human moral capability apart from divine grace, often labeled as 'total depravity'. In contrast, Roman Catholic theology has the tendency to downplay the effects of the fall, and interprets original sin as the loss of supernatural gifts and a return to a natural state. Goris argues that this view became dominant only during the Council of Trent and, although it is often attributed to Thomas Aquinas, it has roots in the theology of Duns Scotus. His reading of Aquinas integrates Aristotelian and Augustinian views of 'human nature' and does justice to Augustine's view that human beings are intrinsically affected by original sin, while keeping their human nature as such. He concludes that this Thomist view on original sin is compatible with the theology of Dordt.

B. Theology at the Synod

Rejecting the Remonstrance is one thing; formulating clear and sharp theological statements about the right understanding of predestination and related point is quite another. The theological chapters in this book show how colorful the themes surrounding election are. Not only are there numerous themes related to it, but each theme can also be highlighted from different angles. All in all, these issues show that theology is about a living reality that cannot be reduced to simple formulas.

First of all, in speaking of the secret of God's grace, we must relate to the 'article with which the church stands or falls'. Dolf te Velde introduces us to the debate that Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) and Arminius had about this doctrine of justication. From his contribution, it becomes clear that Arminius ultimately gives a different interpretation of faith. In his interpretation, faith is not an instrument to receive the complete righteousness of Christ, but it is itself part of our righteousness for God. Although the Canons of Dordt do not explicitly deal with the doctrine of justification, it is clear that they implicitly distance themselves from Arminius' concept of faith.

It is striking that in the nineteenth century Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803–1875) would claim that the Reformed theologians at the Synod of Dordt had let themselves be deceived by debating election instead of justification (Van Vlastuin: 2019). In this way, they had not only become entangled in the discussion about eternal election, but also in the debate about the processes in the soul of man. In this way, the Christocentric theology and spirituality of the Reformation had given way to an anthropocentric approach to the Further Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*).

We see this reflected in the theological subjects in this volume. On the one hand, the Synod of Dordt had to deal with election, while regeneration on the other hand required the attention of the theologians in Dordrecht. Albisser shows that

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delegates turned against the First Article of the Remonstrance about God's election. The Gelderland, Utrecht and Groningen delegations were unanimous in rejecting this Remonstrant article, but their arguments clearly differed. A close reading of the *iudicia* of Utrecht and Groningen, for instance, reveals a predominant interest in election instead of reprobation.

The background of the discussion of divine grace and human free choice lies in the Molinist concept of *scientia media.* Corné Blaauw argues that this concept is incompatible with Reformed theology as it is articulated in the Synod of Dordt, while investigating some primary texts from de Molina, Arminius, Maccovius, Ames, Turretin, and Westminster Confession of Faith. Reformed theologians in our day who use the concept of possible worlds, however, can be inspired by the discussions in the seventeenth-century Reformed sources.

Reflecting on eternal election, the issue of supralapsarianism had to be addressed. Did God elect humans considered as sinners or considered merely as humans? Donald Sinnema explores the disagreements that emerged among the delegates themselves at the Synod of Dordt with regard to this and other issues. These also included the issue of Christ's relationship to election. What does Ephesians 1:4 mean? Is Christ the author of election? Is Christ the foundation of election? Is he the first elected? Is there a difference in his being the foundation of election and the foundation of salvation? Or is Christ only involved in the execution of the election?

If we reflect on Christ's relationship to election, we also have to reflect on the extent of the atonement. Did Christ die for every human being on earth? Or did he die only for the elect? What do the universal texts in Scripture indicate? How do these texts relate to the texts in Scripture that indicate particular redemption? These issues were not completely new. Theologians of the Middle Ages came to a balanced view that Christ died sufficiently for everybody on earth and efficiently for the elect. Calvin also could accept this approach. At Dordt, this approach became problematic. Matthias Martinius (1572–1630) from Bremen proposed to distinguish between a twofold love of God: a more general love for all people and a special love for the elect. He understood this distinction as a framework for the interpretation of Christ's redemptive work. This interpretation implied that Christ in a certain sense died for sinners outside Christ. For Theodore Beza (1519–1605) this was not acceptable. He denied strongly that one drop of Christ's blood was shed for the non-elect. While Sinnema treats this issue in a general sense, Pieter Rouwendal treats this issue more specifically. He argues that the classic distinction of the Middle Ages was no longer suitable for the new situation.

The other side of a focus on God's eternal decision and the extent of Christ's redemptive work was the attention paid to the spiritual processes in regeneration. Bert Koopmans clarifies that this focus led to the theme of the preparatory work in the soul of the sinner. While this concept of preparation on regeneration was not commonly accepted at the Synod of Dordt, it was advocated by some of the Puritans

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and influenced several theologians in the Netherlands. Voetius, van Mastricht, à Brakel, Teellinck, Ridderus and Hellenbroek put this preparatory work before effectual calling. According other theologians, such as Witsius, Smijtegelt and Leydecker, this preparatory work had to be interpreted as part of God's grace. For this reason, they put this work after the effectual call of sinners.

Wim Moehn researched what this attention to the interior meant for the understanding of regeneration. He found that Martin Luther (1483–1546), Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism and Guy de Brès (1522–1567) connected regeneration and baptism. In their understanding, baptism puts us in a new relationship with Christ, which can be indicated as regeneration. In the Canons of Dordt, the concept of regeneration was used for the renewal or conversion of the heart of sinners. Moehn advocates rediscovering the historical meaning of regeneration.

Willem van Vlastuin interacts also critically with the Canons of Dordt. Investigating the Biblical texts about apostasy of saints, he wonders whether the Canons really answered the appeal to these texts. Without criticizing the irrevocability of God's grace in the Canons of Dordt in the personal life of believers, he proposes to give apostasy its due place. This also implies a reevaluation of the church and its corporative election.

Finally, Erik de Boer calls attention to the fact that Dordt spoke about election without considering the election of Israel, taking his starting point with the surprising presence and prophecies of Anna Walker. Her eschatological vision is assessed from her Danish roots and from the commentary on Romans by Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600) and other expositions of Romans 11 that express an expectation of the conversion of the Jews. Some Remonstrants were open to a general conversion of the Jewish people, like Hugo de Groot (1583–1645), in his advice to the States of Holland and West-Friesland on the status of the Jews in the Netherlands. Finally, de Boer turns to the Dutch context and discusses a pamphlet, translated from the English original, which brings Anna Walker's vision close to home. The question remains why the Canons of Dordt hardly ever mention Israel and its election.

C. Dordt's Church Order and its Reception

The number of articles regarding the DCO is limited to five. There are several reasons for this relatively small number. For example, at the conference in Dordrecht Anja van Harten-Tip gave an introduction to her research for the dissertation she defended on November 20, 2018 at the Theological University Apeldoorn. What she presented can be found more extensively in her dissertation (Van Harten-Tip: 2018). Johan Schütte presented a contribution entitled 'The day Dordt caused a storm in Africa (1666)', but before he could submit his article for this publication, he lost it along with much other valuable research material as a result of a robbery

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in the summer of 2019. Jan Dirk Wassenaar offered insight into the development of church visitation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which resulted in an obligation in the DCO to visit each congregation regularly. His article is to be published in another publication.[1] More similar examples like these three could be given.

Still, the number of presentations on Dordtian church polity was comparatively limited at both conferences too. The probable reasons for this are of a more substantive nature. First, the focus of research into historical church polity has changed in recent decades. In the course of the nineteenth century, the DCO enjoyed a growing interest due to a renewed attention to the synod that established it, and to the fact that various ecclesiastical denominations both in the Netherlands and in countries to which the Dutch migrated re-established this church order. As indicated above, scholars have left impressive publications on Reformed and more specifically on Dordtian church polity. However, partly because the influence of Dordtian theology on mainstream Reformed churches in the Netherlands had faded away during the last half century, and partly as a result of commemorations and publications on the occasion of the fourth centennial of assemblies and (national) synods (Wesel 1568; Emden 1571; Dordrecht 1574 and 1578; Middelburg 1581; 's-Gravenhage 1586), the historical-academical interest has shifted. The awareness grew that the DCO is largely a revised version of the church order of 's-Gravenhage (1586). This church order, in turn, depended to a large extent on the regulations of the synod of Emden (1571) and the following synods. These developments have put the value of the DCO into perspective. Second, some aspects relating the reception of the DCO must be mentioned. More emphasis has been placed on the fact that the DCO was fully introduced in only a few provinces of the Netherlands, whereas in the past the conviction dominated that all provinces followed it in general (e.g. van Lieburg: 2014, 124f; cf. Selderhuis: 2019, 166–169). Furthermore, it has become clear that after its introduction, the DCO and similar provincial church orders were frequently adapted and supplemented over the years. As a result, the nationwide successor, the 1816 General Regulations of the Dutch Reformed Church, to a much lesser extent than has been claimed before constitutes a break with the past (Van Lieburg and Roelevink: 2018, esp. 19–57). The third reason also regards the reception of the DCO, but should be mentioned separately because of its importance. The number of denominations that have organized their church life according to the DCO, or to the DCO in slightly adapted form, has steadily declined (cf. Selderhuis: 2019, 189–204). Adjustments had to be made, for example, to ensure the acceptability of ecclesiastical disciplinary rulings in secular courts. Apart from these more or less forced alterations, churches wanted to enable innovations in ecclesiastical life.

1 In: Deddens Kerkrecht, Serie 5, to be published in 2021.

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Slowly but surely the DCO lost its normative character. So, the DCO has become a source to be studied academically.

What do the church polity contributions in this volume offer against the background of the developments outlined above? Johannes Smit reflects on the first part of the first sentence of the DCO (art. 1): 'for the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ.' He establishes its meaning and value in a South African context. Based on this, he defines some principles for a contemporary Reformed ecclesiology. What ties Reformed churches with various church orders together? Both Sjaak Verwijs and Leon van den Broeke discuss articles which are new in the DCO compared to the 1586 church order. In choosing these articles they focus on the decisions of the Dordt synod. Verwijs deals with the *ius patronatus* (art. 5). The synod took a middle course between those who wanted to abolish the old patronage rights on the one hand and the political authorities which demanded its preservation. In so doing, it took into account its position as (the new) public church. Van den Broeke links up with previous research he has done on church deputies (art. 49). He tries to clarify the position of two Reformed scholars in church polity, D. Nauta (1898–1994) and G.M. den Hartogh (1899–1959), regarding the introduction of the so-called 'bodies of assistance' in the Dutch Reformed church order of 1951. Like Smit, Dolf Britz explicitly takes into account the South African context he works in when he depicts the reception of the DCO at the Cape of Good Hope. He concludes that the DCO neither guided nor inspired the contextualization process of the South African Reformed churches for more than two hundred years after the inception of the churches in 1652. Klaas-Willem de Jong takes the revival of the DCO in the late nineteenth century as a starting point and investigates what most influenced F.L. Rutgers (1836–1917) in his emphasis on the autonomy of the local church. His analysis reveals that Rutgers hardly refers to the DCO to substantiate his opinion. The basis of his vision is to be found in the Wesel articles (1568), which differ substantially from the DCO in this respect.

The changing significance of the DCO in the past fifty years also effects the nature of the articles. Except for the contribution of Smit, they are to a great extent descriptive. Yet a significant part of the themes raised still plays a role in today's ecclesiastical life. For example, both van den Broeke and de Jong offer insights into arguments that have been exchanged in historical debates about the relationship between the local church and the church beyond the local. Contributions like theirs may help to put the ongoing debate about this theme into perspective. They may serve to clarify what is at stake in current discussions ecclesiologically and theologically.

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D. Reactions and Reflections After the Synod

The Synod of Dordt and its Canons and Church Order – let alone the initiative to publish a new translation of whole Bible – have exerted a strong influence on religious life, theological tradition, and cultural identity in the Netherlands and its overseas territories up to the present day. The later development of Reformed theology reveals a continuous struggle to understand and apply the theological principles of Dordt in new cultural and historical contexts. The final chapters of this book reflect on some contemporary reactions to the synod and some later reflections about its theological content.

Immediately after the synod, a Remonstrant minister, Henricus Slatius (1585–1623), published a pamphlet, titled *The Predestinated Thief*. From this source text, Henk van den Belt assesses the issue of determinism, of which the Remonstrants accused the synod. He concludes that, although the accusation is incorrect, the popularity of the pamphlet and the difficulty from the Reformed side to refute it do indicate a major cultural shift towards a modern, monistic – and therefore deterministic–understanding of the relationship between the Creator and his creatures. In the context of modernity, it is difficult to maintain the theological notion of a divine and a human level of causality that operate simultaneously (*concursus*). The unnuanced satire of Slatius demonstrates the growing difficulty with the combination of divine providence and human freedom. Van den Belt argues that the Arminians seemed to defend human liberty, but in fact bound the will of God to the contingent choices of human beings in history, whereas the orthodox Reformed upheld human liberty while maintaining the Augustinian doctrines of sovereign grace.

Joke Spaans and Pauline Wegener describe the interesting story of practical theology after Dordt. Initially, preachers were only academically trained and as a result, they considered preaching and public catechising to be the core of their duties. After the Synod of Dordt, there was also another development. The message of Perkins' 'golden chain' had its influence in the Dutch Republic. Initially, these experiential aspects were dealt with by lay preachers, school masters and comforters of the sick. But in the course of time, more interest in the spiritual experience grew in the pulpit as well. Voetius, Hoornbeeck and à Brakel are more important representatives of this tendency. In addition, de Beveren and van Irkhoven can be mentioned. Some time later, this meant that practical theology became an academic discipline.

The *Helvetic Consensus Formula* (1675) arose in Switzerland as a failed attempt at the end of the seventeenth century to safeguard orthodoxy from the growing influence of the School of Saumur, and especially from the teachings of Moïse Amyraut (1596–1664). Pierrick Hildebrand sheds new light on the reception of the Canons in Switzerland during the period of late Reformed Orthodoxy. He shows

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how the *Consensus Formula* met strong resistance within and outside Switzerland in a time where a pan-Protestant union in Europe was strongly supported. Remarkably, the Canons of Dordt were hardly mentioned in this confession, and when the Formula was abandoned, its major detractors were not yet prepared to question the Canons.

The theology of the Synod of Dordt not only influenced later debates among the Reformed, but was also important for the development of Lutheranism. Volker Leppin argues that the doctrine of predestination was not very popular in the Wittenberg reformation. Notwithstanding Luther's strong views expressed in *De Servo Arbitrio,* in the following decades predestination was not among the heavily discussed questions, for instance in the *Formula of Concord.* A deeper interest came in the 1680s, when predestination served as an identity marker for the Calvinists. According to Aegidius Hunnius (1550–1603) faith was a cause of election, be it only a foreseen *causa instrumentalis.* Before the Synod of Dordt, this was just one Lutheran position among others. But after the Synod, many Lutherans saw the rejection of election based on foreseen faith as an anti-Lutheran statement. This brought them to embrace the position of Hunnius, turning this into the peculiar Lutheran doctrine of predestination. Thus, Dordt helped the Lutherans to clarify their own position.

In the final chapter Arnold Huijgen offers a critical evaluation and a positive appropriation of the Canons of Dordt through a hermeneutical approach to Reformed confessions. An emphasis on the historical nature of confessions does not diminish their authority, but it opens up avenues for appropriation through creative reinterpretation. He suggests emphasizing the Christ-centered, and eschatological, nature of predestination, thus articulating the doctrine of predestination in a more balanced way than do the Canons. The Canons exemplify a truly catholic, and biblical, confession of God's effective grace. Still, the place of Israel, and the relation between the election of God's people and the election of the individual presently require more attention. If the Synod of Dordt had not been drawn into the Arminian frame of thought, it would have been possible that the Canons would have centered more on justification than on predestination. For justification was the primary point where the Remonstrants parted ways with the Reformed faith. Huijgen argues for placing justification at the heart of contemporary debates on predestination.

On the whole, we can conclude that the Synod of Dordt was an important moment in the history of theology, spirituality and church, which has changed this landscape definitively. The study of this event is useful and necessary for today in order to interpret the biblical message, replay the meaning of the church, nurture spirituality and point the way to the future.

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Part A: Diverse Contexts

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1. The Ecumenical Council of Dordt

Abstract

This article examines the Synod of Dordt by comparing it to the historic model of General or Ecumenical Councils. This was a category of church assembly which Reformed Protestants venerated and often aspired to, but which also posed vexing ecclesiological problems, and despite much talk of it, they never succeeded in gathering such a council. However, the article argues that the Synod had many of the characteristics of a Reformed General Council; that it was seen by some contemporaries, including some of its participants, in that light; and that this helps to explain its enduring international authority. This applies not only to its canons on predestination, but also to its less well-known rulings on slavery, which it is argued unwittingly helped to delay the conversion and emancipation of slaves in the Dutch empire. The article concludes with a discussion of the Synod's failure to serve the function which enthusiasts for its conciliar role had hoped, and an argument that the episode demonstrates the incompatibility of General Councils with Protestant church structures.

1.1 General Councils and Conciliarism

Ever since Martin Luther distinguished between himself and the Schwärmer, the fanatics, Protestant historiography has recognised a distinction between the respectable Reformations of the Reformed and Lutheran worlds and the disreputable Reformations of Anabaptism, Spiritualism and assorted other gathered and minority movements. The problem has been how to define that distinction. The most commonly cited dividing line in the Reformation era and since has been the practice of believers' baptism, with the pejorative label "Anabaptist" sometimes applied indiscriminately to the disreputable Reformation, despite the fact that radical groups included some paedobaptists (like the Congregationalists of New England) and others (like the Schwenckfelders or the Quakers) who rejected water-baptism altogether. In recognition of those problems, most modern historiography has settled instead on the distinction between "magisterial" and "radical" Reformations: the magisterial being those who pursued reform in alliance with the State and the radical those who chose or were compelled to strike out alone. This too, however,

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has come under increasingly sustained attack, for once again the exceptions and the borderline cases are too numerous to allow it to stand. Was the kingdom of Münster not a magisterial Reformation? Was Balthasar Hubmaier not trying to create an Anabaptist magisterial Reformation: as he put it, "a Christian government at whose side God hung the Sword", in 1526–7 in the Moravian town of Nikolsburg? Were the semi-separatists of Elizabethan and Jacobean England radical or magisterial? In what sense were the Calvinist cell churches in France and in the Low Countries in the 1550s and 1560s "magisterial", Luther having famously called underground conventicles "the work of rats and sects"? And Luther of course classed Zwingli amongst the Schwärmer (Ryrie: 2016; Heal: 2017; Collinson: 1982, 242–83).

In this brief essay I want to consider another possible litmus test to distinguish the Reformation's sensible mainstream from its lunatic fringe, a test which provides a useful lens through which to examine the Synod of Dordt. This is neither a ritual nor a political test, but an ecclesiological one: the notion of the General or Ecumenical Council. Dordt was not (let us be clear) such a Council, but it had some of the characteristics of one, and the category was potent enough for Protestants that those echoes deserve to be heard.

In the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era, Ecumenical Councils gathered at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), and formulated a set of credal definitions that have remained touchstones of Christian orthodoxy (and shibboleths of division) down to the present. Their authority is recognised by Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and by many Protestants – although not in the same sense. We might then distinguish between conciliar Protestants, meaning those who are willing to place themselves in that tradition and to acknowledge those four councils' rulings as definitive; and radical Protestants, meaning those who make no such acknowledgement and are therefore prepared to reopen basic matters of Christology and the doctrine of God which Christendom had long thought settled. This conciliar/radical distinction, however, is not merely about reopening old quarrels; it is about how to settle new ones. Conciliar Protestants are committed in some sense, if only in theory, to the notion that conciliar proceedings have a normative, ideal place within the Christian life.

The place of the General Council in the Protestant imagination is too easily overlooked, not least because we know that no Protestant General Council has ever assembled, nor can we imagine how one ever could have done. In modern times, it is hard for the phrase not to conjure up bodies such as the World Council of Churches, which are generally more dignified than efficient. As such, it is easy to ignore the ubiquitous early modern appeals to Councils, the offers of submission to the decisions of future Councils and the invocation of imagined Councils as rhetorical devices, or as mere genuflections before an idol which was never earnestly expected to stir into life. This does the subject a disservice.

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The point about the classical Councils was not that they were very successful in practice – the opposite, in fact: Nicaea manifestly failed to stamp out Arianism, and Chalcedon produced a genuinely catastrophic three-way schism. However, their combination of state power and dignified ecclesiastical procedure made it possible for later generations sincerely to believe that this was a moment when the whole Church had spoken with a single voice and had settled a momentous question so decisively it would never need to be revisited. Once settled into the Christian imagination as the model of how doctrinal and other disputes ought to be resolved – and, equally importantly, as a model of how even the most intractable disputes apparently could be resolved – the General Council proved immensely adaptible, and was projected back and forwards in time. The gathering to resolve the status of Gentile Christians described in chapter XV of the Acts of the Apostles became the Council of Jerusalem. The councils of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries were invested with the same authority. Then in the Latin West, the post-reform papacy underwrote the conclusion of the Investiture Controversy by assembling in 1123 the body we call the First Lateran Council, which it boldly decided to declare was another General Council, the first such for over two hundred and fifty years. The papacy's claim to control the power of council-making would be crucial to the western Church and to papal power for centuries to come, until the Council's hitherto exclusive power to define doctrine was delegated to the papacy at Vatican I.

Papal control over the Council was too important to be uncontested, however. The Protestant Reformation took place in the shadow of what must long have seemed like a far more serious crisis, the Great Schism of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. The most immediate doctrinal consequence of the Schism was the flowering of conciliarism. The Council of Constance's success in resolving an interminable, intractable crisis was powerful proof that the Niceo-Chalcedonian model worked, and that when the entire Church assembled together under the government of the Holy Spirit it could speak with one voice. Conciliarism as a practical project was outmanoeuvred and defeated by the Renaissance papacy during the 1430s and 1440s, but its defeat had consequences. As the idealistic hopes raised by Constance evaporated, they left a bitter residue. Nor should we forget how long the conciliarist flame was kept burning. Theologians such as John Mair continued to press the case deep into the sixteenth century (Burns: 1963). The kings of France remained openly conciliarist until Francis I finally conceded to reality in the Concordat of Bologna in 1516, and even in 1511 the French made an earnest attempt to convene a non-papal General Council at Pisa. In this context, when Martin Luther appealed over the Pope's head to a General Council in 1518, it was neither an empty gesture nor merely a legal and political manoeuvre. It was a truth universally acknowledged that a General Council was the means by which major doctrinal disputes ought to be resolved. The position which the papacy was in between 1518 and 1545, of refusing to assemble such a council, appeared a baffling,

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