

The Synod of Dort (1618-19)

Milestone of the Reformation

George M. Ella | Added: Feb 18, 2006 | Category: History

The background

The Dutch town of Dortrecht (Engl. Dort), may be unfamiliar to many an English-speaking Christian but it was the place where the churches of Holland, Britain, Germany and Switzerland held a great ecumenical conference which resulted in their unanimous agreement concerning the doctrines of grace reflected in the clear teaching of Scripture and the orthodox faith since New Testament times.

From the start, Britain played a major role in this conference due to several factors, the most well-known being the influence of James I on the Continent. James had studied the works of Vorstius, one of the Continent's Arch-Arminians and was alarmed that he had been chosen to take Jacob Arminius's place at Leyden University. Supported by Archbishop Abbot, he wrote to the Continental universities, asking them not to place such people as Vorstius on their staff. He also sent representatives to the European nobility and church dignitaries, pressing for an ecumenical synod to define the Reformed Christian faith once and for all. James even threatened to sever contact with the Dutch Provinces and their churches should they introduce Arminianism into their universities and took measures to prevent British students studying at Leyden, the seat of Arminianism. James looked on askance at the States General who, in an effort to appear tolerant of Arminianism, were even persecuting those of the Reformed faith.

James found an ally in Maurice, Prince of Orange, Head of the United Provinces, and soon steps were taken by the States General to call a Synod of the Belgic churches. This idea developed in favour of an international synod of Reformed churches, chiefly through James's and Maurice's intervention. Eventually, delegates from the Dutch Principalities and Provinces, England, Scotland, France, the Palatine, Brandenburg, Hessen, Bremen, Emden, Zürich, Berne, Schaffhausen, Geneva and Transylvania were invited. It has recently been argued that the British invitation was sent to James and not Archbishop Abbot, therefore the British delegates did not represent their churches but were mere diplomats of their King. This interpretation would disqualify all the delegates as all invitations were sent out to the rulers of all the participating nations, whether monarchies, dukedoms or republics.

Redressing the historical balance

Knowledge of other important factors has faded in recent years and we must go back to the original documents and the contemporary evidence of historians such as Thomas Fuller in order to gain a balanced overview. Nineteenth century scholars such as Morris Fuller, Charles Hardwick, Josiah Allport, Thomas Scott and Samuel Miller have done invaluable work in analysing the evidence. However, a modern rediscovery of the 'real' Synod of Dort is made difficult by the accounts of Arminian and Amyraldian authors such as Peter Heylin, Daniel Tilenus, Edmund Calamy, Bishop Tomline and John Goodwin, who have played havoc with the facts. These facts have also been distorted recently by fringe groups who unite the two extremes in the Synod and teach Supralapsarianism in an Arminian Grotian (Fullerite) garb. Sadly, the prevailing interpretations of British influence at Dort, be they Anglican, Presbyterian, or Free Church, are greatly influenced by such anti-Calvinistic writers past and present. This chapter is an attempt to redress the balance.

Parallel to the activities of James representing British interests, the Dutch States were shaking off Spanish influence and striving to organise themselves as independent states with independent churches. In doing so, they leaned heavily on the Reformed creeds of neighbouring states, in particular the Belgic Confession and Catechism (originally in French, 1561) and the German Heidelberg Catechism (1563). One of Beza's pupils, Jacob Arminius, however, began to doubt these principles, chiefly after reading William Perkins' *Aurea Armilla*, which he felt destroyed human initiative and responsibility in salvation. He thus countered it with his *Examen Praedestinationis Perkinsianae*, and devised five points which he felt were more acceptable: 1. God bestowed salvation from eternity on those He foresaw would persevere to the end in their faith; 2. Jesus atoned for all mankind but only believers can partake of its benefit; 3. Regeneration and conversion are dependent on the gift of the Holy Spirit; 4. All good works are the product of operations of grace in the believer but this grace can be resisted by the perverse will of the sinner; 5. All such believers can triumph over Satan's seduction but whether or not such may fall from grace cannot be determined until more insight is gained into the Scriptures by the churches. Modern Arminianism goes much further in their pursuit of free-will, declaring, for instance, that it is certain that a Christian can fall from grace.

When, in 1605, the Classis of Dort decided that a synod should be called to counter these points, Arminius and Francis Gomarus (1563-1641), a Belgian and co-professor with Arminius at Leyden, protested, saying that though there was contention amongst the students, the professors were in agreement on doctrine and would thus strive to mediate between the students. Arminius died in 1609 and his followers immediately became more radical and lax even rejecting Arminius's 'moderate Calvinism' teaching on justification. In 1610, they presented a plea for less stringency in doctrinal matters, strongly remonstrating against the States General.

Hereafter, the Arminians were thus nick-named 'Remonstrants' and believers in the doctrines of grace 'Contra-Remonstrants'. This caused much friction in the United Provinces and agreement regarding a Synod was far from unanimous. Finally in 1618 four of the seven states decided to call a Synod at Dort, a Contra-Remonstrance stronghold. The small majority determined that rather than meet their Arminian fellow-ministers around the conference table and strive for consensus, the Arminians should state their case which would then be judged according to the Reformed Confessions. Meanwhile, Gomarus had radically changed his views, resigned from Leyden, chiefly because Vorstius was elected as Arminius's successor, and moved to Saumur in 1614 and to Groningen in 1618 before taking part against the Arminians in the Synod of Dort. Leyden called James's favourite, Peter du Moulin, to the Divinity chair in 1618 to save their reputation but the Frenchman declined.

When James received his invitation, he put the matter into Archbishop Abbot's hands. Happily, Abbot was a firm believer in the doctrines of grace and, in consultation with the King and bishops, chose five of the leading Reformers in England and Scotland. England was thus represented by George Carleton, Bishop of Landaff; Joseph Hall, Dean of Worcester; John Davenant, a Cambridge Margaret-Professor and Samuel Ward, Master of Sydney College, Cambridge. All these were men of outstanding Christian credentials and learning. Equal to them was the representative for the Church of Scotland, Gualter (Walter) Balcanqual, Fellow of Pembroke College. Hall became ill during the Synod and was replaced by Abbot's chaplain, Thomas Goad, a man well-known for preaching against Pelagianism. Presbyterian Prof. Miller of Princeton wrote of these British representatives:

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The policy of the British delegates

Archbishop Abbot briefed the delegates well, which proved of great benefit at Dort as the other churches, because of the splits in their ranks, lacked a common programme and strategy. Abbot advised the British representatives to brush up their Latin as all debates were to be in that language. All points should be discussed amongst the British beforehand and a consensus reached before appearing in public. If new matters arose which they had not considered, they should ask for a postponement for mutual consultation. Doctrines voted on should be self-evident, not open to disputation and suitable for pulpit use. No innovations contrary to the Reformed confessions should be permitted. The British delegates should enter into full church fellowship with their brethren. If they found that the Continental brethren were at sixes and sevens concerning certain matters, the British should strive to mediate. Dr Carleton and his team were advised to keep the honour of their King and country in mind and report weekly to the British Ambassador who was an expert in Dutch affairs. Finally, the delegates were told to use their own initiative when unforeseen matters

arose and keep up a good Christian witness.

The Synod gets underway

Davenant's rebuttal of Cameron's Semi-Pelagianism helped procure French agreement to the canons.

At their first public reception, and in the presence of the Prince of Orange, Carleton gave a speech outlining the need to unite pursuit of the truth with peace and harmony. Before the debates began, all present were asked to take the Admission-Oath, and swore together:

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Promoters of peaceful negotiations

they felt that Gomarus was too hot-headed for sincere Christian debate. For his skill in welding the Contra-Remonstrant factions together, Davenant became known as 'the pillar of the Synod'.

Further major rents avoided

Balcanqual arrived on 16 December and proceedings were adjourned so that his letters of introduction could be read. Bogerman gave a short welcome oration to which Balcanqual replied with equal courtesy. As soon as the Scotsman settled down to the agenda, he protested that some of the delegates were acting outside of their powers and that Contra-Remonstrant resolutions against the Arminians could not possibly be passed by minority groups representing only a third of the party. Gradually, the British were able to maintain harmony in the debates and keep the various factions from quarrelling. This was no easy matter with Mathew Martinus of Buden pleading for Low Sublapsarianism and equally dogmatic Gomarus representing the few High Supralapsarians present. Oddly enough, Gomarus chose to quarrel with George Carleton who was as High Calvinist as they come and had to be constantly warned by the Englishman to keep his temper. When Gomarus was rattled, he even forgot his Calvinism and challenged the wording of Article XVII on Election and Predestination though it was a direct quote from Calvin himself! If Heylin is correct, even Bogerman lost his temper. In their efforts to promote balanced judgment, and keep to the motto of the British Reformation, Unity in Verity, the British were supported by the majority of Germans (i.e. apart from Martinus) and Swiss who looked back on a long history of co-operation and inter-church activities with the British Reformers. Gomarus apologised magnanimously to the Synod because of his outbursts.

Soon, the fellowship amongst the Contra-Remonstrants deepened and we find Hall confessing that it was like being in heaven. The sturdy Reformer

was asked to preach a sermon to the assembled body and his fine words on Romans 9 have been preserved. Understanding the unstable and torn situation of the Belgic churches, Hall exhorted them to:

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Hall chose Romans 9 especially as it was through preaching on this chapter that Arminius had first rent the churches apart. On becoming ill, Hall stayed at the Synod until Archbishop Abbot sent Goad to take his place, so that the British voice would not be weakened. Hall was praised for his fine work in the assembly, given a large commemorative medal and his travelling expenses generously paid.

Difficulties concerning church order, discipline and doctrinal interpretation

their views on church order.

Another matter of debate was the Anglican belief in the universal mission of Christ's death. The Supralapsarians tended to view Christ's death as having no relevance to the non-elect and to the visible world. Modern Supralapsarians thus accuse the British delegates of teaching hypothetical universalism. Davenant and Ward, however, showed how the atonement was savingly sufficient and efficient for the elect alone but that nature in general, as the inheritance of the elect, also benefited from Christ's work. Davenant argued clearly that all are redeemed for whom Christ thought fit to die. He rejected the idea of hypothetical universalism in grace, calling and salvation but maintained that salvation was universal in that it was wrought out for the elect everywhere. Indeed, the true 'Calvinism' of the Dortian Canons is reflected in Chap. II, Articles 5, 6 and 8 which was principally the work of the British delegates. Faced with those who would separate the work of Christ from the decrees of God, Davenant said he would sooner cut off his hand than strike out these passages.

On realising how sound and learned the British were, Carleton, Davenant, Hall and Ward were invited to assist the Dutch in preparing an annotated authorised Bible translation. The ministers agreed and worked at it until its publication in 1637. In 1657 it was published in English under the title *The Dutch Annotations upon the whole Bible: together with the Translation, according to the direction of the Synod of Dort, 1618*. In these days of denominational bickering, it is a blessed but sobering thought to know that generations of Dutch and Belgian Presbyterian churches were assisted in their worship by Anglican divines.

The Canons of Dort

The British delegates found themselves almost at all times in a middle and majority position at the Synod. The document, eventually signed unanimously, referred to five heads of doctrine: Of Divine Predestination;

Of the Death of Christ and the Redemption of Men Thereby; Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof (The third and fourth heads were placed in the same section) and Of the Perseverance of the Saints. These doctrines are now known as the Five Points of Calvinism, though, as the British delegates argued, they were five points of orthodoxy from New Testament times onwards and represented a light which had never been extinguished. The Synod did not claim that these points reflected the sum total of Christian teaching but merely countered the five points of Arminius. Sadly, many modern Calvinists do not go beyond the Five Points, thereby neglecting sovereign grace teaching on repentance, justification and the new birth as do their Arminian counterparts.

The British deputies were then given a tour of the Dutch Provinces where they were given a warm welcome except in the case of Leyden, the Arminian stronghold.

Arminian and Amyraldian efforts to misrepresent the Canons of Dort

Soon after the British delegates reached home, Arminians, banned from Holland, began to settle down in England, some infiltrating the Anglican Church and some setting up Dissenting congregations. In order to gain prestige, they announced that the British delegates at Dort had been on their side. The British situation became as bad as the Dutch. The confusion was all the greater when Tilenus, Montague and Heylin published 'versions' totally contradicting the original canons and making it appear that the delegates were all extreme Supralapsarians and antagonistic to the Church of England. Carleton, Hall, Davenant and Ward had quite a time refuting such allegations. Hall wrote, echoing Davenant's words in his *Ad Fraternal Communionem*:

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Since those days, the British delegates have been called Supralapsarians, High Calvinists, Amyraldians and Arminians by extremists on both side of the atonement discussion, which rather suggests that they stood well-balanced in the Scriptures.

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