

# An Historical Overview of the Synod of Dordt

## Reformation Church History

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### THE SYNOD OF DORDT (1618-1619)

The Synod of Dordt (1618-19) was held in Dordrecht (South Holland); this was during the second generation of the Reformation (59 years after the final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and over 55 years after the first edition of the *Belgic Confession* which was the accepted confession of the Netherlands- ‘Belgic’ referring to northern and southern Netherlands).

**James Arminius** (c. 1559-1609, Professor of Theology at Leiden University; his full name was James Hermanson) had studied at the Genevan Academy and been greatly influenced by Theodore Beza (d. 1605- He was one of John Calvin’s theological successors). As early as 1590, Arminius showed some disagreement with Calvinist theology in that he interpreted Romans 7 as describing the Apostle Paul’s pre-conversion experience and not a struggle of a true and regenerate Christian. Later, Arminius was asked to support Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and election as being biblical, against a Roman Catholic teacher named Dirk Coornheart. Upon reflecting upon his own theology and what he believed the Scriptures taught concerning this, Arminius realized he did not agree with Calvin’s doctrine.

Arminius died in 1609 but those who he had influenced, those such as **Simon Episcopius** (1583-1643) and Ugtenbogaert, formed a group known as the “**Remonstrants**” or better known simply as “**Arminians**”. These followers of Arminius’ teaching were named after the document whereby they taught Arminius’ view rather than Calvin’s view of predestination and election (that has been summarized in the *Belgic Confession*); the document was entitled **The Remonstrance of 1610**.

Essentially Arminius’ (and the Remonstrants’) doctrine of election was that God had elected based on the faith of man that was foreseen by God in eternity past, which Calvinism confessionally denied. The Remonstrants or Arminians also taught in contrast to Calvin and Reformed confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> that the atonement was universal, grace could be resisted, and people could lapse from the grace of God, essentially losing their salvation.

It should be remembered that as early as 1605 confessional, orthodox Reformed pastors were calling for Arminius and his followers to be disciplined for their unbiblical teaching. Politically at this early time some of the Arminians that held political positions refused to call the other Arminians to account and desired rather to revise the **Belgic and Heidelberg Catechisms** to make them more consistent with Arminian teaching.

In God’s good providence, the Synod of Dordt was finally called as an attempt by **Prince Maurice of Nassau** (1567-1625), governor of the Netherlands, who was committed to

the orthodox Confessional Calvinist Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, to bring these confessional brethren to account for theological issues that they had once affirmed and subscribed to confessionally, but had recently denied as being unbiblical.

Simon Episcopius was the spokesperson for the 13 representatives of the Remonstrants. Politically, the Netherlands had just won independence from Spain's Catholic leadership in 1609, and they needed theological unity as well as political unity if the Reformation was going to "take hold" against pockets of Catholicism that yet remained.

The synod was national as well as international in breadth, and met 154 times from November 13, 1618 to May 9, 1619 and Reformed voting representatives from eight foreign countries were invited to participate (Places such as England, Heidelberg, Scotland, Geneva, France, Switzerland and others were represented).

The synod has been called the greatest international Reformed synod that has yet to meet in history because of the theological issues involved with regard to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The synod consisting of some 80 members, both clergyman and politicians, paved the way for Reformation, and built a Reformed consensus in the Netherlands prior to the Westminster Assembly in England (1640s).

The treatment of the Remonstrants may seem harsh to many today. The synod had some men executed for their unbiblical views and unwillingness to submit to the decision of the synod (Grotius who taught hypothetical universalism was imprisoned for his unbiblical teachings). However, we should be reminded of the time period in which these men lived, and admit that these were very important theological as well as political matters that jeopardized the unity of the country, and threatened the spread of the Reformation Gospel against lands and people who were ingrained in Roman Catholic teachings (the Reformation was at stake!!). It is also important to note that when Prince Maurice initially called the council Arminian riots broke out in response causing death and danger for many in the Netherlands. Additionally, Prince Maurice's chief opponent threatened him with war in 1618 for having the audacity to bring the Arminians to be possibly disciplined for their teachings at the synod.

The Synod of Dordt was able to articulate against "The Five Points of Arminianism" the **Five Points of Calvinism** (the response to the Arminian threat was entitled: ***The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands***).

These "five points" or the mnemonic TULIP were developed to answer each objection of the Remonstrants (Important to note is that these five points are not a comprehensive exposition of Reformed Doctrine but a response to the doctrines in dispute; they are a great way to be introduced to Reformed doctrine however). Church historian R. Scott Clark says wisely: "The canons are more than five letters (as in TULIP). The canons teach a pastoral doctrine of grace and provide a model for the stewardship of the gospel" (Quoted in *Tabletalk*, April 2008).