

Leseprobe

GISBERTUS SAMUELS, A REFORMED MINISTER SENTENCED BY THE SYNOD OF ZEELAND IN 1591 FOR HIS OPINIONS ON PREDESTINATION

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The Synod of Dordt of 1618-1619 is well known as the international meeting of Reformed theologians where the views of Jacobus Arminius and his followers were condemned. It established the Canones against the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, as these adherents were known after their protest (or “remonstrance”) to the States of Holland in 1610. For many years, the Contra-Remonstrants had called for a national synod in order to end the controversy, which had been injurious to the unity of church and state. Political approval from the States-General was not received before 1618 and would never again be granted, out of fear of a lasting ecclesiastical schism. Only in 1816, when the church of the old Republic of the United Provinces was reorganised into a national church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, was a general synod held again, this time in a spirit of indifference toward matters of dogmatic theology.

Despite the great significance of the Dordt synod as the delimiter and guardian of Reformed truth, the fact remains that ecclesiastical decisions concerning the doctrine of predestination had already been made earlier in Dutch Reformed history. From the beginning, the standard for orthodoxy on this issue was article sixteen of the Dutch (or “Belgic”) Confession (*Confessio Belgica*) of 1561—the article that deals with God’s eternal election of believers. At the national synods, held by the Dutch Reformed churches in 1578 (Dordrecht), 1581 (Middelburg) and 1586 (The Hague), it was decided that all ministers should sign the Confession, in an effort to achieve greater ecclesiastical and clerical unity, with the addition in 1586 that every minister who refused to sign would be deposed.

Some ministers objected to subscribing to the Confession, especially with regard to article sixteen. In the Classis of Leiden, two ministers expressed reservations by submitting a written statement on the doctrine of predestination. In general, however, the Confession was signed by all ministers irrespective of their own private leanings, including those who later sided with the Remonstrant faction. Arminius himself had subscribed to the Confession in the Classis of Amsterdam in 1588. Afterwards, however, he stated that his erstwhile agreement pertained only to the words of the Confession, claiming the right to interpret the article for himself. It was for that reason that, after 1608, some classes specifically required candidates for the ministry to approve both the words and the accepted meaning of the Reformed creed.

When the National Synod of The Hague met in 1586, it had to contend with the controversial ideas of Herman Herberts regarding, among other points, his view on the doctrine of predestination. Herberts had been a minister in Dordrecht, but had been deposed because of his refusal to preach from the Heidelberg Catechism. He found a new pulpit in the city of Gouda, at the time already known as “a gathering place of heretics.” At the 1586 synod, Herberts admitted that he was not in full agreement with the doctrinal standards of the church, expressing reservations about article sixteen of the Confession in particular. An agreement between Herberts and church authorities

was only established in 1593, after a series of conferences with delegates from the provincial synod of South Holland. A declaration of reconciliation was read in the churches of Gouda, Dordrecht, Rotterdam, and Schoonhoven, an indication of the relevance of the topic to people in those communities.

In this article I demonstrate that as early as 1591, the provincial synod of Zeeland had already been confronted with a minister who objected to the sixteenth article of the Dutch Confession. The reason why this story has been overlooked in the literature until now is that the full acts of this synod were not recorded. We have only the f