At the National Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619) the question of man’s predestination was central. Is predestination God’s decree of divine election to salvation as based on foreseen faith? Or is it (double) predestination to life or to death, a decree in God’s eternal counsel of unchangeable election out of free grace, or condemnation on account of one’s own guilt? This subject became most pointed when contemplating the question of how to harmonise this predestination with the salvation of infants who die in their infancy; with those that are baptised or not baptized? While all children have been conceived in sin, new-born babes are too young to come to faith or conversion. Are there infants who must be counted as reprobates because there is simply either election or reprobation? The subject of this study is how this emotionally laden question pertaining to the salvation of infants who die in their infancy was debated, and how the answer was established at the Synod and in the Canons of Dordt.

1. Original Sin and Eternity

Medieval theology and spiritual care struggled with the consequences of the emphasis Augustine (354–430) had placed on original sin. What is the eternal destiny of new-born children when they die without having received the sacrament of baptism and are thus in a state of original sin? This led to discussions about the necessity of baptism for salvation.

The Synod of Carthage (418) had confirmed over-against the Pelagians that baptism of infants was necessary to cleanse them from original sin, even though they themselves had not yet sinned. Another canon of the same synod is as follows: “It has been decided likewise that if anyone says, when the Lord said: ‘In my house there are many mansions’ [John 14:2] it should be understood in such a way that in the kingdom of heaven there
will be some middle place, or some place anywhere where the blessed infants live who departed from this life without baptism, without which they cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven, which is life eternal, let him be anathema.”¹ According to Augustine’s conviction the existence of such place should not be taught as God will indeed punish original sin.²

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) assumed a limbus infantium (fringe, outskirts, thus ‘outer place for infants’), a place distinguished from hell and heaven, where children temporarily atone for original sin, thus escaping eternal punishment.³ Those who upheld Augustine’s belief were called tortores infantium, child torturers. The Roman Catholic church has never arrived at a formal declaration of dogma on this particular point, but she became tradition-bound. However, in the spring of 2007, because of awareness of the vast number of abortions, Benedict XVI set his papal seal under a theological declaration, initiated by John Paul II, in which the theological opinion of limbus infantium or puerorum is denied. “The exclusion of guiltless infants from paradise contradicts Christ’s special love for the little ones.”⁴

A comparable theological and pastoral theme was under discussion at the beginning of the seventeenth century, particularly in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. However, the question then related more specifically to the consequences of the various positions pertaining to the doctrine of predestination, specifically the question of the election and salvation of infants of Christian parents who died in their infancy.⁵

² Cf. Augustine, De peccatorum meritis 1.21; Contra Julianum 5.44; Enchiridion 95: “Tunc non latebit quod nunc latet, cum de duobus parvulis unus esset assumendus per misericordiam, alius per judicium relinquendus, in quo, is que assumeretur, agnosceret quid sibi per judicium debetur, nisi misericordia subveniret” (J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina 44: 275).
³ Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologica, V, 69.6. Thomas quotes Augustine, Enchiridion 93: “Mitissima est poena puerorum qui cum solo peccato originali decedunt” (69.6.2).
⁴ See the note ‘The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptised’ from the International Theological Committee, after the agreement of Pope Benedictus XVI, published on the website of the Vatican on 19 January 2007 (www.vatican.va).
⁵ Submitted to the Synod were also the questions of the legitimacy of baptism administered by lay people and of the admission of baptism of children, born of unbelieving parents and adopted in families of Christians (in India). There is hardly any connection between the last question and that of the election of infants of believing parents who die young. The Swiss delegates proposed that the delay of baptism should not cause harm as through God’s election these heathen children are sheep of Christ’s fold and thus included in the covenant of grace. On the basis of, particularly 1 Cor. 7.14, they did not think it right