At the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century, the Synod of Dordt crowned the Contra-Remonstrant victory over the Remonstrants. That the assessment of this Synod by the opposing parties has—to my knowledge—never been investigated is hardly surprising, for the conclusion seems to be foregone: the Remonstrants will no doubt have loathed it, while the Contra-Remonstrants sung its praises to the skies. Yet since experience has taught me that historical reality is often more complex than assumed, in the present contribution I intend to discover whether there were within the Contra-Remonstrant camp less positive or perhaps even negative assessments of the Synod. Will the historical reality once more present us with a surprise?

Threnos

The year 1627 saw the publication of an interesting work at Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland which was at the time the second most important province in the Netherlands. The title of this work was: Threnos. A lamentation showing the causes of the pitiful condition of the land and the desecration of the Sabbath-day. In which is dealt in particular with the differences concerning Sabbath observance or the Christian day of rest.1 One of the many remarkable things about this book concerns its assessment of the Synod. However, before examining this aspect in detail, we will give some consideration to its author.2

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1 Jacobus Burs, Threnos. Ofte wee-claghe, aenwijzende de oorsaken des jammerlijcken stants van het lant: ende de ontheyliginge des sabbath-daechs. Daer in bysonderlick verhandelt worden de verschillen, van het onderhouden des sabbaths ofte rustdaechs der christenen (Middelburg, 1627). This work is extremely rare, and only two copies are known to exist: Gouda, Steenblok Library, 1173 and Emden, Johannes à Lasco Library, Theol. 8º 459 R.

2 For the following, see W.J. op ’t Hof, Voorbereiding en bestrijding. De oudste gereformeerde pietistische voorbereidingspreken tot het Avondmaal en de eerste bestrijding van de Nadere Reformatie in druk (Kampen, 1991), pp. 60–61.
Threnos was penned by Jacobus Burs, Reformed minister of the church of Tholen in Zeeland. He was born on 16 October 1589, in Vlissingen, also in the province of Zeeland, to Gillis Burs, likewise a Reformed minister, and to Geertruyt Moels. Whereas father Gillis had moved to Middelburg as early as June 1589, mother Geertruyt stayed behind in Vlissingen and did not rejoin her husband in the capital of Zeeland until after the birth of Jacobus. Gillis Burs would remain in Middelburg until the day of his death in April 1634.

After studies at the University of Leiden, where he enrolled on 31 October 1609, Jacobus Burs entered the ministry as Reformed pastor to the church of Tholen in 1612. He served there for almost forty years until his death on 21 April 1650. His lengthy tenure in office will surely have influenced the ecclesiastical, social and cultural life of Tholen. Burs even served as the first headmaster of the local Latin school (grammar school) which was founded in 1624.

Burs was also active in the life of the broader ecclesiastical assemblies, being sent as delegate to the provincial synod held at Zierikzee from 9 to 13 October 1618. He was thus an important man in the Classis of Tholen.

As pastor he fervently opposed the collegium qualificatum. In the towns of Zeeland this governing body consisted of the consistory to which five members of the magistracy were added, and became active with the calling of ministers and the election of elders and deacons. Given that the magistracy already had a considerable say in the consistory to begin with, not infrequently the civil government ended up being able to carry the vote within the collegium qualificatum as well.

Aside from the Threnos, Burs also wrote two polemical works against Roman Catholic doctrine and three others against Petrus Lansberghius, a Reformed minister in Goes who had been deposed in 1613 by the church of Zeeland. Clearly Burs had a real fighting spirit. This brief survey therefore appears to present us with a truly Reformed, Contra-Remonstrant minister who was not afraid to become immersed in polemics.3

In the Threnos, his very first book, Burs reacted to criticism that had been uttered against the Synod of Dordt. What was the nature of this criticism, and who had expressed it? Concerning the former question

3 The approbations of the Classis of Tholen and of the Groningen professor of theology, Franciscus Gomarus, found in Threnos abundantly confirm the orthodoxy of Burs.