THE SYNOD OF DORT IN THE BALANCE

by J. van den Berg

In this farewell lecture¹ I intend to bring together some threads of the research I had the opportunity to do during my Leiden period. I chose as my subject a number of critical reactions to the doctrinal resolutions of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands which met in the town of Dort (Dutch: Dordrecht) from November 1618 till May 1619. To the historian, these reactions are especially interesting because they are a mirror of the theological trends and developments in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Protestantism: the decisions of Dort were much debated and often led to a parting of the ways between conservative and more latitudinarian forms of theological thinking.

Thanks to the participation of a comparatively large number of foreign delegates, to a certain extent the Synod was a muster of the forces of Calvinism in Western Europe; it was an assembly of an ecclesiastical nature with, unmistakably, political aspects and effects as well. Central in the discussions stood the doctrine of predestination, which in the preceding decades had given rise to vehement conflicts in the Netherlands—the more virulent, because they were closely bound up with the political divisions in the young Republic. It all started in this town, this university, these buildings². In a public disputation, held on 7 February 1604, the Leiden professor of theology Jacobus Arminius defended a number of theses on the doctrine of predestination which were carefully and unpolemically formulated, but whose angle of approach was different from that of Calvin and Beza. His colleague Franciscus Gomarus, who right from the beginning had been suspicious with regard to the doctrinal purity of Arminius, held a disputation on 31 October, in

¹ This article is the slightly revised text of my ‘farewell lecture’, given in the ‘Great Auditorium’ of Leiden University on 18 December 1987. It first appeared in Januari 1989 in a ‘house edition’ under the title Dordt in de weegschaal. Kritische reacties op de synode van Dordrecht (1618-1619) and was dedicated to the memory of Prof. Dr. J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (1896-1987). I thank Dr. N. E. Emerton, Cambridge, for the correction of the English translation.


Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis 69 (1989)
which he defended the Calvinist doctrine of predestination with all its logical conclusions. One thing and another led to a chain-reaction which did not end with the death of Arminius in 1609 and the departure of Gomarus from Leiden in 1610. Inside and outside the province of Holland a heavy confrontation took place between the followers of Arminius, the Remonstrants, and their opponents, the Contra-Remonstrants. At last Prince Maurits threw (as the poet Vondel says) his ‘blade of steel’ into the balance. The subsequent fall of the Pensionary Oldenbarneveldt, the most influential politician in the Republic, with whose fortunes those of the followers of Arminius were almost indissolubly connected, sealed the fate of the Remonstrants: their doctrine was condemned, and they were banned from the Synod in a dramatic way. The orthodox doctrine and the condemnation of the Remonstrants were laid down in the ‘Canons of Dort’, which henceforth together with the Belgic Confession and the Catechism of Heidelberg constituted the three so-called ‘Forms of Unity’ of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

What exactly was the core of the conflict? The discussions on the doctrine of predestination were determined by the question how man can reach his ultimate goal, eternal salvation. Common to most seventeenth century believers was the idea of a future eternal bipartition of mankind. Universalism in the sense of a belief that ultimately all men would be saved was still very rare at that time. When in seventeenth-century discussions the word ‘universalism’ was used, its meaning was that in the fulness of his universal love God wanted all men to attain salvation, but it was implicitly supposed that many would reject the offer of salvation and thus be eternally lost. The ‘decline of hell’ had scarcely set in3. Heaven and hell were still full realities. This gave to the discussions on this matter an existential tension which helps to explain why a doctrinal conflict such as that between Arminius and Gomarus could draw such deep furrows in the field of the church.

In their doctrine of salvation the Reformers had strongly emphasized the factor of God’s free grace. For Calvin (as indeed for the younger Luther4) this implied that for his eternal salvation man was totally depen-