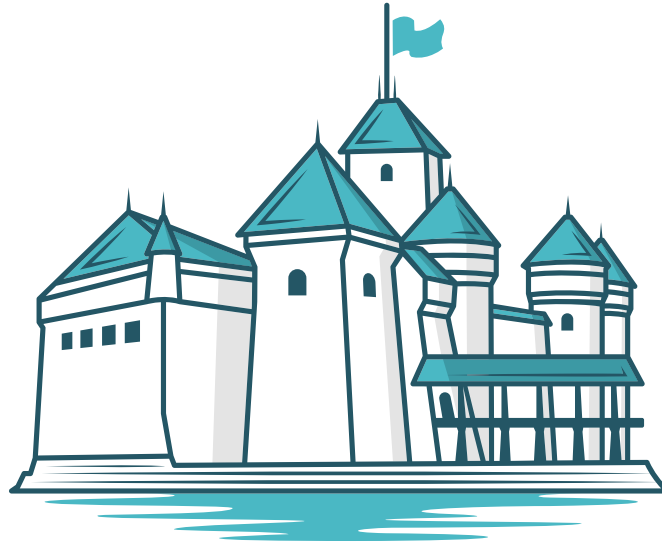




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*For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion:
in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
he shall set me up upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5*

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The feast of unleavened bread shalt thou keep. Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, as I commanded thee, in the time of the month Abib: for in the month Abib thou camest out from Egypt. All that openeth the matrix is mine; and every firstling among thy cattle, whether ox or sheep, that is male. But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before me empty. Six days thou shalt work, but on the seventh day thou shalt rest: in earring time and in harvest thou shalt rest. And thou shalt observe the feast of weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end. Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before thee, and enlarge thy borders: neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the Lord thy God thrice in the year. Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the passover be left unto the morning. The first of the firstfruits of thy land thou shalt bring unto the house of the Lord thy God. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk. And the Lord said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.

—Exodus 34:18–27

The Festal Tenor of God's Covenant

When Moses had first received the tables of the law, God had ended his revelation with the promise of sabbath rest and refreshment (Ex. 31:17). So also when Moses received the tables of the law the second time, God ended his revelation with the promise of covenant joy (Ex. 34:18–27). What a wonderful comfort for God's sinful people in our sorrowful sojourn. Let us listen to the tenor of God's covenant words and discern therein the gospel of our salvation.

As God's final instructions to Moses before Moses returned from Sinai with the law for the second time, God highlighted several of the judgments that he had delivered to Moses the first time. God highlighted the feast of unleavened bread, the feast of weeks, and the feast of ingathering. God highlighted the three appearances of all Israel before God for the feasts. God highlighted the redemption of the firstborn sons and the offering of the firstlings of the flocks and the offering of the firstfruits of the field. God highlighted the sabbath day of rest. And God highlighted the gospel proverb that the feasts

were not for Israel's destruction but for her saving health, just as the dam's milk is not for seething her kids but for nourishing them.

Why would God highlight all these things? Certainly not as vain repetition. Nor to distinguish these judgments as more significant than the others. Nor even as a summary of the previous judgments. Rather, God highlighted these specific things because in these things was revealed the tenor—the sense and substance—of his covenant with Israel. “After the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel” (Ex. 34:27). By his mouth and voice and words God revealed what the covenant was.

And of what did God speak in these covenant words? Of feasts and festivals and festivities! Of firstborns and firstfruits and firstlings! The tenor of God's covenant is not woeful bondage but joyful feasting. The substance of God's covenant is not contractual obligations but gracious belonging. Such a covenant can only be a covenant of grace. If God's covenant is by the law, if God's covenant

is a conditional covenant, if God's covenant is a covenant of works, then God's people could have no joy in God's covenant. God's people could only despair as they failed in God's covenant, ceased to be God's covenant friends, and perished. But God's covenant is a covenant of joy! God's people belong to him, they live with him, and they feast before him. And therefore God's covenant is a covenant of grace.

Ah, yes. A covenant of grace. Which means a covenant of grace *in Christ*. For Christ is the first-born and the firstfruits. Christ is the passover and the atonement and the fulfillment of every animal slain. Christ is the fullness of the feast and the nourishing health of salvation. Christ is the sabbath rest of the people of God. Everything that God highlighted is fulfilled in Christ. For Christ is God's covenant of grace.

I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. (Isa. 42:6–7)

And because Christ is God's covenant with us, the covenant is a festive covenant of joy.

Is it not wonderful? And it is forever true, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. "Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel" (Ex. 34:27).

—AL

CANONS OF DORDT

Historical Background of the Canons (3)

The Synod of Dordt (1618–19) was a national synod. What does this mean, and what is the significance of this fact?

That the Synod of Dordt was a national synod does not primarily mean that the national government of the Dutch Republic was involved in the synod. It is certainly true that the political rulers of the Dutch Republic had a large hand in the meeting of the Synod of Dordt. The States General—the governing body of the Dutch Republic—convened the synod, hosted the synod in a government building, paid the expenses of the synod, invited delegates from other countries to attend, and sent government delegates to witness the synod. The final thing to appear in the Canons that Dordt adopted was a government certification of the accuracy of the Canons.

Thus have all things been carried out as recounted above concerning the five disputed heads of doctrine, which we, the most Illustrious and Sovereign Delegates of the States

General deputed to this synod, certify by the signature of our hands.

Here follow the names of the delegates from the States General who were deputed to the synod as the representatives of their respective provinces, that is, of the delegates of Gelderland, Holland, Zeeland, the Province of Utrecht, Friesland, Transylvania, and the State of Groningen and Omland.¹

It is also true that the Synod of Dordt acknowledged the significant role that the States General and Prince Maurits of Orange had played in the convening of the synod. In its preface to the Canons, the synod recounted how God had led the leaders of the Dutch government to convene the Synod of Dordt.

But blessed be the Lord forever, who, after hiding his face for a moment from us (who had provoked his wrath and indignation in many ways), has testified to the whole world

¹ See "Translation Comparison: Conclusion," *Reformed Pavilion* 3, no. 24 (September 20, 2025): 8.

that he does not forget his covenant nor despise the sighing of his people. For when it appeared that, humanly speaking, there was scarcely any hope of a remedy, he inspired the most illustrious and mighty States General of the Dutch Federation with this mind, that with the advice and direction of the most illustrious and courageous Prince of Orange, they resolved to advance against these raging evils by those legitimate means, which have been sanctioned over the long course of years by the examples of the apostles themselves and the Christian church that followed them, and which have been employed before this with great fruit in the Dutch church as well; and by their authority they convened a synod at Dordrecht from all the provinces which they governed; having sought for it the favor of the most serene and powerful King James of Great Britain and of the most illustrious princes, earls, and republics; and having obtained many of the most esteemed theologians; that by the common judgment of so many theologians of the Reformed church, those doctrines of Arminius and his followers would be judged accurately and by the word of God alone; that true doctrine would be established and the false rejected; and that—by divine blessing—concord, peace, and tranquility would be restored to the Dutch churches. This is that blessing of God in which the Dutch churches rejoice, humbly acknowledging and gratefully proclaiming the mercies of their faithful savior.²

However, that the Synod of Dordt was a national synod does not primarily refer to the involvement of the national government. Rather, that the Synod of Dordt was a national synod primarily means that all the Reformed churches in the Netherlands were represented at the synod. The synod was not a local or provincial gathering of churches but a national gathering of the churches. Delegates from the churches in all seven provinces of the Dutch Republic

were present at synod, deliberated at synod, served on committees to draft advice at synod, and voted on the Canons that were presented to synod. All the representatives of the churches delegated to synod signed not only the Canons of Dordt as a whole but also each head of doctrine.

That we thus believe and decide, we certify by the signature of our hands.

Here at the conclusion, as well as after each head of doctrine, follow the names of the president (Johannes Bogerman), assistant presidents (Jacobus Rolandus and Hermanus Faukelius), and secretaries (Sebastianus Damman and Festus Hommius) of the synod, the names of the professors of theology in the Dutch churches, and the names of all the members who were deputed to the synod as the representatives of their respective churches, that is, of the delegates from Great Britain, the Electoral Palatinate, Hussia, Switzerland, Wetteraw, the Republic and Church of Geneva, the Republic and Church of Bremen, the Republic and Church of Emden, the Duchy of Gelderland and the County of Zutphen, South Holland, North Holland, Zeeland, the Province of Utrecht, Friesland, Transylvania, the State of Groningen and Omland, Drenthe, and the French churches.³

It was the representatives of the church who met at Dordt. It was the representatives of the church who judged the Remonstrant doctrine. It was the representatives of the church who adopted the Canons of Dordt. Dordt was a national synod in the sense that all the churches of the nation were represented in the deliberations and decision.

What is the significance of the fact that the Synod of Dordt was a national synod? First, the Synod of Dordt consciously spoke as the voice of all the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Dordt's judgment in the Remonstrant controversy was not meant as the personal sentiments of private individuals but as the public and official declaration of the Reformed church as a whole. By speaking

² See "Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht: Preface," *Reformed Pavilion* 3, no. 15 (July 19, 2025): 8–9.

³ "Translation Comparison: Conclusion," 10.

with one voice as a national synod, Dordt defined the Reformed doctrine of salvation. That is, a particular teaching about salvation is Reformed only if it harmonizes with the Canons, and a particular teaching is not Reformed if it militates against the Canons. The Reformed doctrine of salvation is not defined by whether the church that teaches it calls itself Reformed or not. Rather, the Reformed doctrine of salvation is defined by the Canons of Dordt.

The Canons of Dordt is very useful today in evaluating the doctrines of churches and ministers who claim to be Reformed. Any doctrine that makes God's work contingent upon man's work is Arminian. Any doctrine that has man fulfilling conditions and accomplishing prerequisites before God bestows his saving blessings is Arminian. A great many churches today that claim the Reformed mantle are actually Arminian and Remonstrant in their theology. The Canons of Dordt define Reformed doctrine to be that of divine sovereignty and define Arminian doctrine to be that of divine contingency. Reformed believers—whose church membership must be in a Reformed church and not an Arminian church—can use Dordt's definition in identifying which churches are truly Reformed and which are not. And Reformed believers today need not fear the inevitable accusation that their views are harsh and are the minority in the Reformed church world. Reformed believers have Dordt on their side when they confess divine sovereignty and when they repudiate divine contingency as a lie from hell.

Second, the fact that the Synod of Dordt was a national synod was a first step in the triumph of Reformed church polity over Erastian church polity. Reformed church polity teaches that Christ governs his church by spiritual means through the officebearers of the church. The essence of Reformed church polity is expressed in such places as Lord's Day 48: "Rule us so by thy word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee; preserve and increase thy church" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 123). Or again, in Belgic Confession 29: "Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only head of the church."

Erastian church polity, on the other hand, teaches that the state has the oversight of the church. The state's oversight becomes especially obvious in matters of church discipline. The state appoints, supports, and removes ministers. The state receives or excommunicates members.

The Remonstrants in the Netherlands were in favor of an Erastian church polity. They knew that if Arminius' views were judged by the church, the Remonstrants would be condemned. But the Remonstrants had many sympathizers among the government officials. In fact, the most politically powerful man in the Dutch Republic—Johan van Oldenbarnevelt—was sympathetic to the Remonstrants.

Therefore, throughout the 1610s the Netherlands was gripped by a church political controversy between the Reformed and the Remonstrants right alongside the doctrinal controversy. Should a civil synod be convened, in which the civil rulers would judge between Reformed and Remonstrant doctrine? Or should a church synod be convened, in which the officebearers of the church would judge between Reformed and Remonstrant doctrine? The Remonstrants insisted on a civil synod. The Reformed insisted on a church synod. In either case, due to the entanglement of church and state that persisted in the Netherlands at the time, the States General would have to convene the synod. But the all-important question was who would have the authority to judge the Remonstrant doctrine: the church or the state.

In God's sovereign providence and in his grace for his church, God caused Prince Maurits to support the Reformed cause. The Prince of Orange was a war hero in the Netherlands and had the full support of the significant military might of the Dutch Republic. Prince Maurits' father, Prince William of Orange, had led the Dutch fight for independence from Spain. God had used William and Maurits to establish the Dutch Republic as a nation in its own right. The States General of the Dutch Republic rallied behind Prince Maurits' support of the Reformed cause. The States General called for a national synod composed of the churches, which synod would decide the Remonstrant controversy.

From a human point of view, the calling of the Synod of Dordt was accompanied by too much political intrigue. Oldenbarnevelt, who was himself a hero of Dutch independence, supported a provincial rebellion. Maurits and the States General crushed the rebellion and executed Oldenbarnevelt. Accusations of stacked courts and heavy-handedness abounded. But above all the human politicking, the sovereign God reigned; and he turned the hearts of heroes and princes and kings whithersoever he would for the

sake of his beloved church. By his inscrutable ways and according to his eternal good pleasure, God caused the Synod of Dordt to convene on November 13, 1618. It was a national synod, composed of representatives of the Reformed churches. God would lead the synod to expose and condemn the Arminian error of divine contingency, even as he caused the synod to confess and extol the Reformed gospel of divine sovereignty.

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