



Aza Goudriaan, Fred van Lieburg (eds.), **Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619)** (Brill's Series in Church History 49; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011, 442 pp., ISBN 978 90 0418 863 1).

As its three hundredth anniversary approaches, the Synod of Dordt retains its fascination for scholars. As an international gathering of Reformed divines it effectively and authoritatively established what was understood (positively or negatively) to be Reformed Christian orthodoxy for centuries to come. The singular importance of the Synod has made it an event of sustained interest by historians and theologians ever since. This particular volume 'revisiting' the Synod is the fruit of a conference held in 2006 in Dordrecht organized under the auspices of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam and the Free University of Amsterdam. Its sixteen essays comprise a diverse range of topics, from high theology to low satire, to an obscure Danish prophetess who at one point tried unsuccessfully to break into the Synod.

One of the services this volume does is remind us of just how international a gathering the Synod of Dordt was. Several of the essays address this particular dimension, such as Nicolas Fornerod's appraisal of the Genevan delegation to the Synod. Fornerod demonstrates that the Synod's delegates were not nearly as doctrinally uniform as the Synod's critics made them out to be. In fact there were vigorous differences of opinion about such core theological issues as atonement. Also, Geneva, like all the other delegations, came with its own interests, in this case preserving the theological legacy of its own luminaries Calvin and Beza. Agreement about what would appear in the Canons of Dordt came only at the end of complicated discussion and negotiation among delegates. Likewise Anthony Milton's essay re-examining traditional assumptions about the British delegation's supposedly strained relationship to the rest of the Synod underscores just how much the Canons were ultimately a product of the interplay of different interests, both national and theological.

All of which points to a larger aspect of the ongoing historiography of the Synod, which rejects the centuries-long stereotypes that have lionized or vilified the gathering as either a triumph of true doctrine or the defeat of liberal Calvinism (a historiography nicely described, by the way, by Joris van Eijnatten in the volume's concluding essay). In her masterful essay Joke Spaans adroitly examines some of the contemporary 'imaginings' of the Synod that led directly to some of that stereotyping. She points out that few events in church history provoked so much contemporary representation, in this case through the medium of print. Many of the propagandistic images depicted the Synod as both

authoritative and triumphant, restoring concord to the fractured church and body politic. Spaans deftly analyzes the different forms this propaganda could take – satire, allegory, emblems – and convincingly argues that in this particular goal, the restoration of ecclesiastical order, the Synod succeeded decisively.

A few of the essays in the volume are related to the Synod at best tangentially. Fred van Lieburg's examination of a Zeeland preacher disciplined in the 1590s for his opinions on predestination has little to do with the Synod *per se* beyond noting that arguments about such doctrines in the Dutch Reformed Church long preceded Dordt, a point already well-known to scholars of the period. Jürgen Beyer and Leigh T.I. Penman's essay about the eccentric Danish prophetess who unsuccessfully petitioned the Synod is primarily an exercise in historical detection, which while interesting is at best ancillary to the subject of the Synod.

This points to a larger problem with *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*: as a conference volume it does not cohere together especially well. Here alas the fault lies chiefly with the editors, who provide a modest introduction which describes the circumstances of the conference itself but offers the reader precious little insight into what the conference (and the resulting volume) was intended to be about. This a common enough deficit in conference volumes, but one still wishes that the editors had taken more care to provide a more helpful introduction, one that explains the themes and commonalities of the conference contributions (beyond the simple fact of the Synod itself) and offers some analysis of what larger conclusions we might draw about the event as a historical phenomenon. As it stands this volume comes across simply as a collection of essays, all of which have something to do about the Synod of Dordt, and no more than that.

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