

# The Dort Church Order maintaining Real Gospel

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## INTRODUCTION

Church Polity is important!

Reformed Polity is Presbyterian-Synodal. The church is governed through office bearers and assemblies.

## DORT POLITY TAKES SHAPE

### *Contexts*

#### The broader church context

Contra Romanists: equality of all office bearers and contra Anabaptists: requirement of office bearers

Belgic Confession: Article 30: The Government of the Church

Article 31: The Officers of the Church

Article 32: The Order and Discipline of the Church

#### The narrower church context

Remonstrants (Arminians): increased State involvement in church affairs

Contraremonstrants (Calvinists): limit State involvement in church affairs

#### The social and political context

The 80 Years' War (1568-1648) aka *Dutch War of Independence*. Meant restrictions.

Two major languages: French & Dutch. And thus two cultures.

Seventeen political units, under various powers

### *Origins of Dort Polity*

Calvin's Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541ff.)

French Reformed Church Order: Paris 1559

Dutch Reformed Church Synods: (1568/71), 1571, 1574, 1578, 1581, 1586

State infringes on ecclesiastical terrain: 1576, 1583, 1591, 1612 (Erastian *CO Utrecht*)

Some major points of issue on the relationship Church-State

- Appointment of office bearers (aka *patronage*)
- Assets and finances (aka *silver cord*)
- State involvement in church discipline
- Restrict church influence in state matters

May 13, 1619: Dort decision to review "the canons of the last synod" = CO-the Hague 1586

## DORT SPECIFICS

### *Guiding Principles*

**Belgic Confession article 32:** *We believe that, although it is **useful and good** for those who govern the church to establish **a certain order** to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded.*

Principle 1: Scripture alone (key text: 1Corinthians 14:33 & 40)

Principle 2: freedom in minor points of church governance and practice

### *Congregation and Offices*

BC article 30: *We believe that there should be ministers or pastors, ... elders and deacons*

BC article 31: *We believe that [they] ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the church*

The so-called "congregational meeting" was originally "A meeting of the consistory with the deacons to which the congregation has been invited and at which congregational members may voice an opinion"

Clear principles. But the election process proved tough to codify

Dutch London influence: "more democratic" (congregation determines long list, consistory elects)

French influence: “more aristocratic” (election by consistory, approbation by consistory)

French London influence: “democratic-aristocratic” (election by congregation from a double number)

Codification of the election process:

1619: aristocratic & democratic-aristocratic, London’s democratic approach sidelined

GKN 1905 / CRCNA 1914 / GKSA 1916: all three with freedom

CanRC 1983: phrasing favours (if not demands) the democratic approach

### **Specifics: Worship**

**Bible Translation:** A new translation had been commissioned in November 1618.

**Songs:** 150 Psalms of David, Ten Commandments, Lord’s Prayer, Songs of Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, Apostles’ Creed; *O Grote God die liefde bist (O Great God who is love)*

### **Specifics: Confession Subscription**

Titus 1:9 is proof confessional subscription is proper. The practice of using a signature dates back to Nicaea 325 AD. The Dutch Reformed introduced the use of a signature in 1574.

Dort: “We, from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine [of the confessions] agree in everything with the Word of God.”

No confessionalism

Overijssel delegation rapped over the knuckles

No cross references to BC or HC in Canons of Dort

CO article 31: “contradict Scripture or [Church Order]”

### **Specifics: Broader Assemblies**

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century debate: “Old Polity” (= “Doleantie Polity”) vs. “New Polity”

Presbyterianism was spurned by Doleantie Polity (A. Kuyper) but appealed to by “New Polity” (H.H. Kuyper).

Today, given ecclesiastical fellowship and ICRC / NAPARC it is considered “a minor point of church order”

Some considerations:

Gisbertus Voetius (father of Dort Polity) appreciated Samuel Rutherford (father of Westminster Polity).

CO-1619 article 42: “If in any place there be more than one minister, they may all show up in the classis and vote, except in cases pertaining to their person or churches in particular.”

The Form for Subscription for ministers assumes that an initial judgment of heresy is by consistory or classis. The first court of appeal is the regional synod, the second is the national synod.

## **DORT POLITY PERFORMS**

The Synod adopted the Church Order but it was not enforced in most places. There were no national synods for almost 200 years. Further, the state meddled in doctrinal discipline cases.

The French period (1795-1815) was a period of political instability and thus confusion. In 1816 the State introduced the *General Regulations* This Polity of The Hague was Erastian and collegial.

During the 1880s there were two church schisms with the main Dutch Reformed Church: the Secession of 1834 and the Doleantie of 1886.

Seceders: 1836: Adopt CO-1619 Dort

1837: CO-1837 Utrecht: Seceders splinter

1840: CO-1619 Dort + state recognition: some reunification, some splintering

1869: CO-1619 + preamble: some reunification

The Seceders and Dolerenden were divided (among others) over the preamble. The Seceders rescinded the Preamble in 1891, paving the way for the union of 1892 that formed the GKN.

Dort international

North America: Christian Reformed Churches (1857); Southern Africa: Reformed Churches (1862)

Revision under Doleantie influence

1905: The Netherlands; 1914: North America; 1916: South Africa.

## **SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS**