

Gisbertus Voetius: The Pillar of the *Nadere Reformatie*

By Robert Martin

I want to begin with the words of the eminent Geerhardus Vos.¹ “Voetius occupies a place of high honor among the Dutch theologians of the seventeenth century. He was, perhaps, the ablest, the most learned and the most influential of all Calvinistic divines belonging to that period so rich in eminent names. Well-nigh every factor in the vigorous and multiform life of the Reformed Church of his days has found in him a classical and thoroughly Calvinistic expression. He was a scholastic of the first rank, who knew how to handle the weapons of his craft with great skill and subtlety; a mystic of a deeply pious vein; a writer of exceptional fertility; and a teacher of wide influence.”² In the ensuing biography, I intend to give you a small glimpse of this great divine that labored until death to further the cause of the Reformation in the period known as the *Nadere Reformatie*.³

Gisbertus Voetius was born March 3, 1589, during the Eighty Years’ War⁴. He was born in Heusden, a town of the Netherlands, to an eminent family of Westphalian descent and Reformed convictions.⁵ His grandfather, Nicolaas Dirks, was the mayor of Oudheusden. Nicolaas publicly chose the cause of the Reformation. Although he was imprisoned, he persevered in his beliefs. Shortly after his imprisonment, he died within the church walls of Den Bosch. Many, including Gisbertus, suspected foul play in his death at the hands of his Spanish guards. According to Gisbertus, Nicolaas died on the 8th day of his imprisonment.⁶ Gisbertus’ mother, Maria de Jageling, belonged to a respectable family that is named in the Dutch book of martyrs. Maria’s father, Daniël de Jageling, was forced to flee his hometown after an attempt to free a victim of the Inquisition from his prison in s’Hertogenbosch secretly by night. Daniël and his brother fled for Breda, leaving all of their valuable possessions behind. William of Orange gladly received them. Daniël was given the

care of the arsenal, at a salary of around 800 guilders, a considerable amount of money in those days.⁷ Gisbertus’ father, Sir Paulus Voet, had an active role in the Dutch Revolt. He fought to defend Heusden against the attacks of the Spanish forces. Voet was killed eight years after Gisbertus’ birth while serving in the army of Prince Maurits.⁸ Gisbertus was the sixth of eight children. Two of his brothers, both named Daniël, died at a young age in succession. Following was Nicolaas, who died at the age of four. His sister, Cecelia, died in her childhood. The only siblings to survive their youth was Dirk, his older brother by three years, and Paul,

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1. This biography is very much in debt to Dr. Joel R. Beeke’s *Gisbertus Voetius: Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety* and the article on Voetius by C. A. de Niet in *Encyclopedie Nadere Reformatie* edited by W. J. op’t Hof. Due to time constraints, the biography by A. C. Duker was not able to be consulted as much as we had hoped. A heartfelt thanks to my dear brother, Gijsbertus de Pauw, who graciously donated his time to translating the Dutch sources cited in this biography.

2. Vos, G. (1894). Review of *Gisbertus Voetius* by A. C. Duker. *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, 5 (1894): 714.

3. *Nadere Reformatie* can be translated as Further Reformation. For a discussion on this term see the article by Dr. Joel R. Beeke prefixed in W. à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, ed. J. R. Beeke, trans. B. Elshout (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992).

4. Also known as the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648.). This was a war against the control of the Catholic dominated Spain.

5. J. R. Beeke, *Gisbertus Voetius: Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 9.

6. A. C. Duker, *Gisbertus Voetius* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1897), 8.

7. Duker, *Ibid.*

8. C. A. de Niet, “Voetius, Gisbertus,” in W. J. op’t Hof, *Encyclopedie Nadere Reformatie*, Vol. II (Utrecht: De Groot Goudriaan, 2016), 467–479.

the younger brother by three years, along with his sister Elisabeth.⁹ At the cost of the city administration, Gisbertus was allowed to study at the Latin school of Heusden. He also received a scholarship to study theology in Leiden at the State College.

Being that the young Voetius was about to be thrown into the Arminian controversy that would soon change his life, it seems appropriate to give a little background on Jacob Arminius.

Arminius had been a bright student who received an orthodox Reformed education at Leiden, Geneva, and Basel. He returned to Amsterdam after his studies and was ordained to the ministry there in 1588. He served as a pastor in Amsterdam for fifteen years, and then from 1603 served as a professor of theology at Leiden until his death in 1609. In his years as a minister and professor, he wrote a number of treatises (now collected in an English translation in three volumes), but did not publish any of them in his lifetime. Arminius's decision not to publish was unusual and shows that he was aware that his theological views would be very controversial. His writings show that he was furiously opposed to a Calvinist approach to predestination called supralapsarianism. But his rejection of supralapsarianism led him to abandon all Calvinist views of predestination. He seems to have adopted instead the teaching on predestination of the Spanish Jesuit Molina known as middle knowledge. He knew that the large majority of his Reformed ministerial colleagues would regard Molina's views as semi-Pelagian.¹⁰

9. Duker, 9.

10. W. Robert Godfrey, "Preserving the Reformation: A Historical Picture of the Synod of Dort," in Jon D. Payne; Sebastian Heck, *A Faith Worth Defending: The Synod of Dort's Enduring Heritage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019).

11. C. Brant, *The Life of James Arminius*, trans. J. Guthrie (London; Glasgow: Ward & Co.; Lang. Adamson, & Co., 1854), 28.

12. Brant, 28.

13. C. Butler, *The Life of Hugo Grotius: With Brief Minutes of the Civil, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of the Netherlands* (London: John Murray, 1826), 84.

14. H. O. Old, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 4.456.

15. J. R. Beeke, *Gisbertus Voetius: Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 9.

16. "Voetius, Gysbertus, D. D.," in *Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* J. McClintock and J. Strong (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1881), 10.808.

17. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

18. Arie de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 105.

Arminius' shift in theology is incredible considering he left Geneva with the following testimonial from Beza, "his mind was in the highest degree qualified for the discharge of duty, should it please God at any time to use his ministry for the promotion of his own work in the Church."¹¹ His shift in theology came about when Arminius was called upon by Martin Lydius to respond to a treatise written by some theologians at Delft titled, *An Answer to Certain Arguments of Beza and Calvin, from a Treatise on Predestination as taught in the Ninth Chapter of Romans*.¹² It was upon the death of Francis Junius that Arminius was appointed to a professorship of theology at the State College of Leiden.¹³ There was much controversy surrounding his appointment. It is with this in mind that we turn back to Voetius.

At the age of fifteen, young Gisbertus went off to Leiden to begin his theological studies at the State College.¹⁴ He studied theology there from 1604 to 1611. During those years, it was the focal point of the Arminian crisis. He was profoundly influenced by the lectures of Franciscus Gomarus, a staunch Calvinist. Voetius later wrote, "I shall be Gomarus' grateful disciple to the end of my life."¹⁵ He also attended the lectures of James Arminius. Voetius found himself defending Gomarus against the followers of Arminius. Voetius was appointed a lecturer in logic while a student at Leiden. As a lecturer, he gained a reputation for his rigid defense of Reformed orthodoxy.¹⁶

Voetius widely oriented himself in the sciences of the day. Alongside his compulsory courses, he attended the classes of Daniel Heinsius. The classes of Heinsius sparked Voetius' interest in classical literature. He studied writers such as Aristophanes and Lucian. Voetius collected books on a wide array of sciences, but he had a special preference for the study of logic, which he would later describe as instrumental in his handbook of theology. In his teaching, Voetius made use of the introduction to philosophy by Bartholomäus Keckermann, the German logician and theologian. It was not only the academic theology of those days that interested him. He also studied the piety of the *Devotio Moderna* movement, especially Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. Kempis left an indelible impression on him and greatly shaped his piety.¹⁷ Outside of Kempis, the works of Willem Teellinck greatly influenced him. On Teellinck, Voetius wrote, "as he has for countless others, has truly opened my eyes and my heart to God's grace, so that I understand many things more precisely and reflect on them more fully."¹⁸

In 1610, the Arminians had a victory at Leiden. Voetius' mentor, Gomarus, was removed from the faculty.

Due to these disputes with the Remonstrants, the regent of the State College, Petrus Bertius, removed Voetius from his dormitory. This is not surprising considering Bertius was a close friend of Arminius and would later give his funeral oration in the theological hall.¹⁹ Voetius was forced to live with friends and finish his studies elsewhere in Leiden. His hopes for an academic career at the State College were terminated. These events greatly changed the course of his life.²⁰

Voetius left Leiden in 1611, and with a recommendation from Gomarus, he accepted a call in Vlijmen.²¹ At the young age of 22, he was ordained to the ministry on September 25, 1611. The congregation had to be built from the ground up in the heavily Roman Catholic community. The first Church Council was formed in 1612, and on Easter of that year, the first Lord's Supper was celebrated.²² Also in 1612, he organized the Vlijmen flock with the installation of elders and deacons.²³ During his time at Vlijmen, Voetius continued to apply himself to rigorous studies. Outside of his normal theological studies, he devoted himself to mastering Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Eastern languages. He also rigorously digested the works of many great divines, with a special focus on those of William Perkins. It was in May of 1612 that he married Deliana van Dieſt (1591–1679). They shared sixty-four years of marriage and were blessed with ten children. Two of his children would later become professors of philosophy at Utrecht.²⁴

It was through his contacts within the community of Gorinchem, Voetius once again became involved in the battle with the Remonstrants. He made a name for himself as an educated defender of the Counter-Remonstrants. He received a call from the city of Rotterdam, but Voetius preferred to stay in his birthplace. Despite strong opposition from a group of Remonstrants led by Johannes Grevius, he took the role of preacher after the death of the minister Nicolaas Petri Houweningius on May 24, 1617. The complications surrounding Grevius led to his removal in 1618. Voetius insisted that he be replaced by Johannes Cloppenburgh, the minister of Aalburg. Voetius had befriended him during their days at the State College. As students, they created a strong comradery and separated themselves from the rest of the students by speaking Greek during lunch instead of Latin, which was the custom. Voetius spoke of Cloppenburgh as his alter ipse, his second self.²⁵ By 1618 Heusden's internal difficulties escalated to a national level. A failed attempt was made by the national government to send Hugo Grotius, a prominent jurist and legal scholar, to Heusden to influence the

magistracy. In lieu of this attempt, the Heusden consistory removed Grevius. Through persuasion by the government, Grevius was later reinstated. This led to a schism that would eventually be ended by the Oranġist revolution.²⁶

We now turn to the part of his life for which Voetius is most known for today, being the youngest delegate to the Synod of Dort.²⁷ Voetius was 29 years old when he was elected to the Synod of Dort. Dr. Joel R Beeke has some helpful remarks in regards to Voetius' time at Dort:

Two items of interest surface in his attendance at Dort: First, his most prominent action was his able defense of Johannes Maccovius, whose supralapsarian conception of predestination was of a more logically rigid nature than that of most other delegates. Voetius appealed to the authority of William Ames, who had expressed confidence in Maccovius' intentions, though he regretted some of his terminology. Interestingly, Voetius' later thought was marked by an attempt to reconcile the experiential piety of Ames and the neo-Aristotelianism of Maccovius. Second, Voetius later wrote appreciatively of close friendships established with a number of English delegates noted for their emphasis on Puritan theology and practice.²⁸

After Dort, Voetius' influence greatly increased. In the 1620s, he was charged with being the deputy in various matters relating to Dort. These tasks would include attending the archives of Synod, assisting in the final approval of the Church Order of Dort, a member in the commission that was to purge Leiden of any Arminian influence.²⁹

In 1628, he published his first major works on piety, *Proeve vande Cracht der Godtsalichheyt (Proof of the Power of Godliness)*, in which he defended the Canons of Dort against the attacks of the Arminian scholar, Daniel Tilenus. Voetius felt these defamatory criticisms on the Canons of Dort had to be refuted. This was in part because it was published in the common tongue,

19. Brant, p. 300.

20. Beeke, 10.

21. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

22. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

23. Beeke, 10.

24. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.* Beeke, *ibid.*

25. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

26. Beeke, p. 10.

27. Sadly, the journal he kept during his time at Dort has been lost.

28. Beeke, 11–12.

29. Beeke, 12.

and many uneducated people, who were not yet firmly rooted in the faith, were in danger of being infected with heresy.³⁰ Following this, he published *Meditatie van de Ware Practijke der Godtsalichheit of der Goeder Werken* (*Meditation on the True Practice of Godliness in Good Works*), a published sermon on James 2:12.

During the years of 1629 and 1630, Voetius served several times as a field preacher in the State Army of count Willem van Nassau, who under mayor Frederik Hendrik had besieged s’Hertogenbosch on May 1, 1629. After taking the city, Nassau attempted to purify the city and the surrounding villages of “papal idolatry” to establish Reformed doctrines. Before Voetius, Nassau attempted this mission with three other pastors, Henricus Swalmius from Haarlem, Godefridus Udemans from Zierikzee, and Samuel Everwijn from Dordrecht. Under the efforts of Voetius, a congregation was formed, and a church council was instituted. Voetius left the area for a few weeks to visit Den Haag to consult with the Reformed church there. Rumors began to spread of his untimely death. His supposed death was interpreted to be the punishment for criticizing the crucifixes in the Cathedral and the cemetery. To prove the rumors false, when Voetius returned, he walked back and forth on the city walls to show everyone he was very much alive. He continued his work in Den Bosch until the end of August 1630. He turned down a request to become the new preacher of the city.³¹

During this period, Voetius had his first major confrontation with Roman Catholic theologians. The Reformed ministers requested a public debate with the Roman clergy of the city. The invitation received no response but led to a series of polemic writings that

ended in 1635 with the publication of Voetius’ *Desperata Causa Papatus* (*The hopeless case of the papacy*), a response to Cornelis Jansenis. ³² It was also during this time he entered into a debate with Samuel Marenius that would last four decades. These debates ended when the two theologians united to battle Cartesianism in the late 1660s.³³

Voetius is often credited with being the first to develop a distinctly Protestant theology of missions.³⁴ “Voetius attempted not only to sketch the outlines of a solid theology of missions, but he was also the first who attempted seriously to give missiology a legitimate scientific place in the whole of theology.”³⁵ It was during his seventeen years of ministry in Heusden that he turned his attention to missions. Voetius played a key role in persuading trading companies to send missionaries with the Dutch ships all over the world.³⁶ “For Voetius, mission is explicitly an expression of the will of God in predestination (eternal decree), and missionary sending is the means of fulfilling this decree. God is thus the first cause of mission, the church the secondary active cause. The glory of God is the *ultimate* end of mission; conversion and church planting are *penultimate*. Even the kingdom of God is subordinate to God’s glory.”³⁷

Voetius maintained a rigid schedule at Heusden. He tirelessly shepherded the flock that was entrusted to him, preaching eight times a week and often counseling those struggling with assurance. On top of a demanding pastorate, he further continued his studies along with tutoring students in logic, metaphysics, and oriental languages.³⁸

In 1622, after Cloppenburg left for Amsterdam, Voetius joined forces with Johannes Slatius, his earlier replacement in Vlijmen. He declined calls from prominent cities such as Rotterdam, Dordrecht, and Den Haag. Voetius desired to labor and die in the same vineyard of his birthplace, he later wrote in an essay written to Slatius, *On the Heavenly Life*. Despite these desires, it appears that God had different plans for him. In 1634, Voetius was appointed as professor of Eastern languages at the newly-founded school in Utrecht. Upon his departure from his flock on August 20, 1634, he bid them farewell with a sermon on Philippians 1:27.³⁹

He was inaugurated at Utrecht with a speech titled *Oratio Inauguralis de Pietate cum Scientia Conjuncta* (*Inaugural Speech on the Desired Relationship between Piety and Science*). In this speech, Voetius argued that theologians ought to aim at “the heavenly philosophy, divine law, spiritual medicine, heavenly letters, the oldest and most trustworthy history, and exalted eloquence.”⁴⁰

30. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

31. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

32. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

33. Beeke, 13.

34. C. Ott, S. J. Strauss, S. J. and T. C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, Encountering Missions (series), ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), xxv. Jan A. Jongeneel, “The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius: The First Comprehensive Protestant Theology of Missions,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 26, 1 (1991):47–49.

35. Jongeneel, *ibid.*

36. Beeke, 13.

37. Ott & Tennent, 82.

38. Beeke, 13.

39. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

40. Willem J. Van Asselt, “Scholasticism in the Time of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1620–1700),” In *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Willem J. Van Asselt (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 145.

The year 1636 would prove to be a big year for Voetius. In March, he was appointed as the rector upon Utrecht being elevated to the status of an academy. For this major event, he preached a sermon titled *Sermon on the Usefulness of Academies and Schools, together with the Sciences and Arts That Are Taught in the Same* (*Sermoen van de nuttighejd der academien ende scholen, mitsgaders der wetenschappen ende consten die in de selve geleert werden*). His base text was Luke 2:46 when the young Jesus visited the temple.⁴¹ Later that year, Gomarus awarded him the Doctor Honoris Causa, honorary degree of doctor. He also fulfilled his long-desired wish to travel to England, to further relationships with the theologians he had met during the Synods of Dort.⁴²

It was during his career at Utrecht that he would influence many prominent Dutch scholars such as Petrus van Mastricht, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Johannes Hornbeek, and Herman Witsius, to name a few. “In his lectures, Voetius focused particularly on systematic theology, ethics, and church polity. He also taught logic, metaphysics, and the Semitic languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac. In his lectures on theology, he followed the Leiden *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, compiled by Leiden professors (1625), together with the dogmatic works of Gomarus, Maccovius, Ames, and, of course, Calvin’s *Institutes* and Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*.”⁴³

In 1637, Voetius was called to be the pastor at Utrecht. He labored in the ministry until November 23, 1673. While preaching, he was overcome with a fever and fainted, which marked the end of his preaching career. Voetius would continue as a professor.⁴⁴

Much of the later part of Voetius’ life was wrapped up in fierce debates against the rising philosophy of René Descartes, the Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius, and the preaching of Jean de Labadie:

While at Utrecht, he also unceasingly opposed Johannes Cocceius, the Bremen-born theologian who taught at Franeker and Leiden, and whose covenant theology, in Voetius’ opinion, overemphasized the historical and contextual character of specific ages. He believed that Cocceius’ new approach to the Scriptures would undermine both Reformed dogmatics and practical Christianity. He battled the philosophy of René Descartes, which he was convinced placed reason on a par with Scripture at the expense of faith, and therefore was destructive for the church. He recognized the danger in Cartesianism that ultimately man becomes the measure of all things. He resisted Jean de Labadie, whose preaching had been the source of spiritual revival in

Swiss Reformed churches, for promoting notions of mystical subjectivism and of separation from the instituted church.⁴⁵

Voetius’ rigid debates against the attacks on Reformed orthodoxy often left him isolated. For him, the loneliness was a natural part of defending the biblical and Reformed truths. This loneliness would not follow him to his death. He developed a loyal group of friends and students that were nicknamed the “Utrecht Circle.” His followers were later to be called Voetians. By the time of his death, Voetians could be found in all of the universities and ecclesiastical provenances of the Netherlands.⁴⁶

On November 1, 1676, Voetius died after a short illness. On his death bed, Voetius quoted Bernard of Clairvaux, “My merit, therefore, is nothing but the mercy of the Lord.”⁴⁷ He was buried on November 3, 1676 in the Catherijnekerk. The academic memorial speech was given the next day by his colleague at Utrecht, Andreas Essenius. His congregation held his funeral, with the sermon on 2 Samuel 3:38 by Cornelis Gentman, an old student of Voetius, on the following Sunday, November the 5th.⁴⁸ ■

Next Page: Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), late seventeenth century engraving by Johannes Willemsz. van Munnickhuysen (1654/55–after 1701), after the painting by Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693).

41. Van Asselt, 145.

42. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*

43. Beeke, 15.

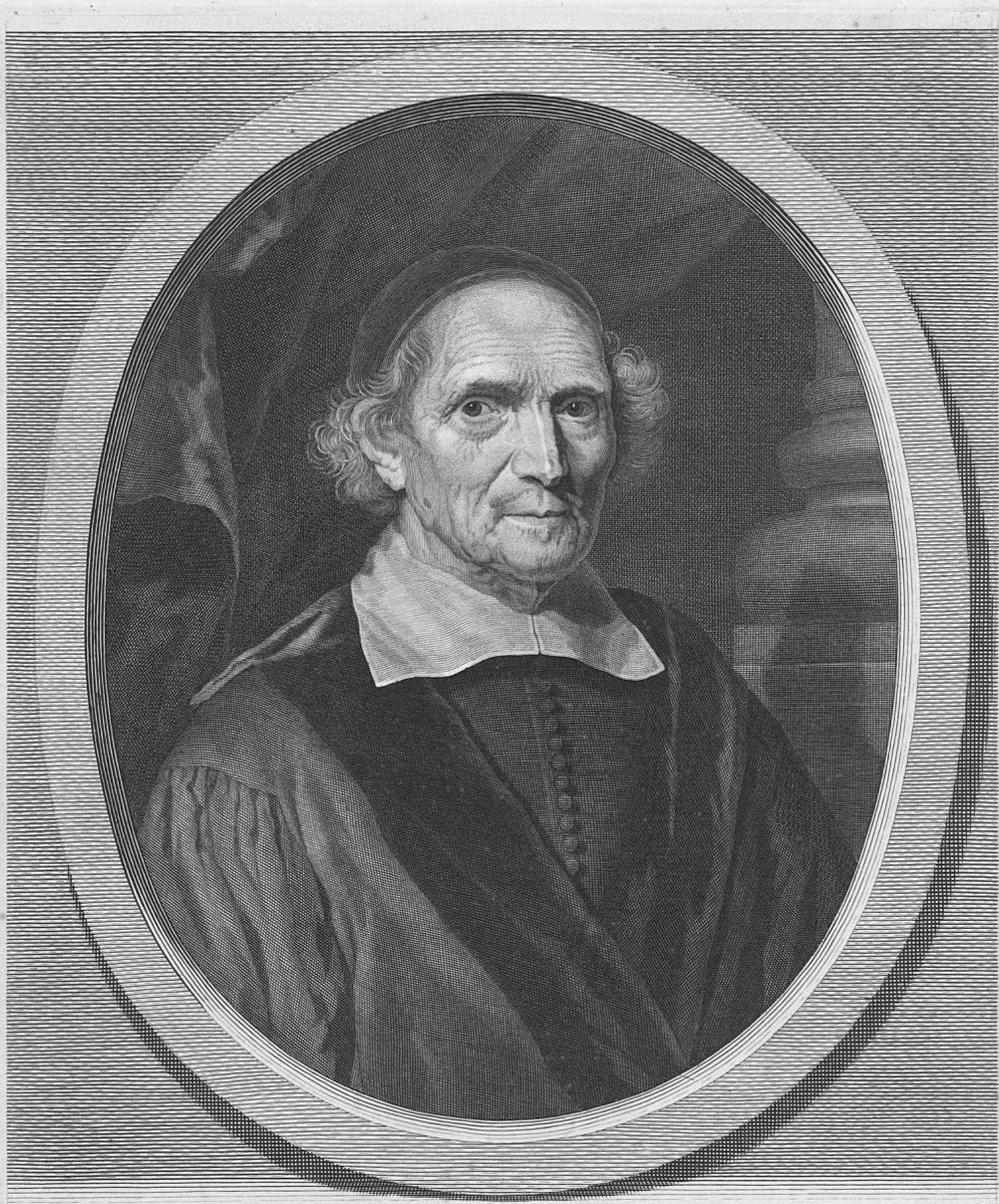
44. Van Asselt, 146.

45. Beeke, 16–17.

46. Beeke, 16–17.

47. Arie de Reuver, 40. This translation of Bernard is from *St. Bernard’s Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles*, trans. A Priest of Mount Melleray (Dublin; Belfast; Cork; Waterford: Browne and Nolan, 1920), 2.199).

48. C. A. de Niet, *ibid.*



GISBERTUS VOETIUS, HEUSDANUS.

SS. Theol. Doctor, ejusdemq; Fac. ut et lingue sancte ULTRAJECTI Professor primus, & Eccl. Pastor.

*Pietate, sinceritate, & iudicio necuere, eruditione consummata, rerum Ecclesiasticarum peritissimo, & summo scriptis
celeberrimus.*

Orthodoxae Religionis Christianae equo, & officillo, in temporibus Vindae.

*Propheta, a raris, scismaticum, scandalorum hostis, & oppugnator
acerrimus.*

*Ex iis, qui ad Synodum Dordracenam de seorsu fuerunt superstes omnium
supremus.*

Vixit animo maxime tranquillo, et sereno.

Mortuus est pie et placide anno aetatis LXXXVIII. mensis IX. die IX. Munitur. LXVI. Professor. XIII.

Maes Pinxit.

Silut. CID. IO. CLXXVI. Kal. Novemb.

J. J. Mommberg fecit Sculp.