



Winds of Change in the CanRC

By: Ed Helder

The Canadian Reformed Churches, as a federation, are at a critical juncture in their history. Synod Burlington 2010 will be a decisive watershed. Either the federation will collectively awaken, return and reform or she will continue on her current path away from her roots, away from her basis: the Word of God, as expressed in The Three Forms of Unity and as federated under the Church Order of Dordt.

The Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) have adopted new practices and made a series of decisions over the last 40 or more years that have gradually placed her on a parallel path with many other deforming church federations.

The Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA) struggled for many years, most particularly in the period after WWII, with scripture criticism and the new hermeneutic (new modern liberal interpretation and exegesis). They accepted ideas from those influenced by theories of modern theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884 -1976), who taught that the miracles of the New Testament, the virgin birth of our Saviour, His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven all belong to a mythical portion of the proclamation. Bultmann taught that modern man is unable to believe the miracles in Holy Scripture. Also the ideas of Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) further confused many by distinguishing between the Word of God and the Bible. He taught that the Bible is but a testimony of God's Word, thus the Bible is not identical to God's Word, and through the use of much traditional terminology led many casual readers to follow his views. Dr. Arnold De Graaff and Dr. Calvin Seerveld of the AACS (the Assoc. for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, the continuation of and proponents of the Philosophy of the Law or Sphere Sovereignty – De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee of H. Dooyeweerd & D. Vollenhoven which initially also had a number of followers among our ministers) added to the confusion by teaching that the Bible could be divided into the "Text Word" and the "Power Word" and had objections to the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy and infallibility. One of the results of these teachings were the gradual inability to refute the new hermeneutic and the acceptance of scripture criticism resulting in the CRC's adoption of women's voting. These and other influences culminated in the 1972 CRC Synod adopting "Report 44", entitled "The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority". The acceptance of this report officially meant the loss of the reliance on and the use of God's Word as the normative basis in the CRC, so that those who denied God's authoritative Word

and the Confessions could no longer be effectively disciplined (Dr. Harry Boer, Dr. Allen Verhey & Howard J. Van Til's of The Fourth Day fame). In line with the above developments, the CRCNA soon adopted an unscriptural church order and soon went from women voting to allowing women to enter the offices. Those struggles were not without impacts amongst other "reformed" churches, including the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Some of us will still remember how, in line with the struggle in the CRC, approximately 40 years ago one of our late ministers explained to our Canadian Reformed young people at a YPS League weekend in Chatham Ontario that Paul's view of women was probably time bound and influenced by the

That we may rightly know



still remember with the struggle approximately 40 our late ministers Canadian people at a YPS in Chatham Paul's view of probably time influenced by the

culture of his day. Earlier as a youth, I remember discussing the "days of creation" in catechism classes as our minister tried to allow room in the length of the creation days to reconcile scripture with old earth theories. Around the same time we had asked our minister about the GKv "Open Brief" controversy and were advised that we needed to leave room for those who wished to have a different slightly looser binding to the Three Forms of Unity and the accepted Church Order. What was especially disconcerting was that these applications of the new hermeneutic did not cause a disturbance in the CanRC or a reaction leading to a public retraction. The idea which began to be imported at that time was that the Bible was not God's Word but that God's Word was found in the Bible. Some among us will still remember our parents re-telling how Dr. Klaas Schilder exposed the dangers of the dialectical theology of Karl Barth in his polemical articles. The earlier roots of the current new hermeneutic and scholasticism, not having been explicitly dealt with by the churches, prior to starting of our Theological College, and were passed on to a new generation of ministers.

The roots of the New Hermeneutic, scripture criticism and other liberal approaches can be found among the "reformed" well before the Secession of 1834. In fact, it is clear that the Secession was a return to God's word and the binding to the Three Forms of Unity (especially a renewed awareness of the Canons of Dordt) from the time of the Synod of Dordt (1618-19). Later the modern scripture critical approach was again clearly apparent in the matter of Rev. Dr. J.G. Geelkerken's (1926) suspension.

Today we can again read of references to Barth in the "reformed" press by members of churches with whom we have or propose to have Ecclesiastical Fellowship (partly because of his disarming use of reformed terminology) who quote Barth as if he was a faithful orthodox/reformed exegete. We again see the New Hermeneutics influence in the matter of women's voting rights. It is especially telling that so many ministers have been influenced, in fact it is now difficult to find a minister who will take a faithful stand. Over the years more and more voices were heard advocating in favour of women's voting rights. This item has now served at several Synods and if one takes the time to read the current committee's

report to Synod 2010 we can hear the same type of opportunistic re-interpretation of scripture to achieve the desired result of allowing women to vote, in fact the report even states that “it is the covenantal obligation” of the sisters to participate in the voting of office bearers, and yet at the same time the majority report also tries to give the appearance of maintaining the headship principle and scriptural gender role differences, but then applicable to the family and only to the authority of the special offices in the church. The report also tries to create confusion, in appearing to agree that voting/election is the means by which God calls men to office, but yet not that voting is actually the means used to identify and decide who is/are called to office (or “leads to the call”). With input from the whole congregation, council selects and then presents the candidates to the men of the congregation; the men elected are appointed by council in accordance with the adopted regulations, if there are no valid objections to their installation. The report states that there is “undue emphasis on the element of voting in the process of calling”. Why then, the repeated requests to allow women to vote, to determine who the Lord calls and who are to be appointed to the offices? Of course, the misapplication of the democratic ideal, that all are to be enfranchised to speak via the vote, plays a role. As does the modern idea that scriptural gender role differences are to be a thing of the past and that in the New Testament those concepts are merely based on Paul’s personal view of women as based on the culture of those times.

Thus the new hermeneutic continues to have much influence in changing CanRC practices and perceptions. We see this clearly in regard to the office bearers responsibility for the fencing the Lord’s Supper table, to guard the pulpit and our view of the church. For when Synod 1992 decided to offer the Free Church of Scotland the weakened relationship of “Ecclesiastical Fellowship” they also compromised the teaching of scripture, for in our practice we accepted an unscriptural view of the church, with the FCS having the pulpit open to ministers of other main line apostate “churches” (as long as the preacher agreed to stay within the “core” gospel), and the Westminster Confession’s election perspective was acquiesced to, as being faithful to scripture. As a consequence synods could no longer deem it necessary to deal with the “divergencies” in the OPC, and have thus accepted them into EF as well. Thus we had approved of both a verbal warning as a means of fencing the Lord’s Table and the “invisible/elect” dilemma, bringing us to a denominationalist or pluriform church view. Since then we have further liberalized, and it has now also been declared acceptable that self testimony by guests can be accepted, while in the past it was recognized that scripture taught that only our triune God may testify of itself, while man required confirming witnesses. This continues to bring both the offices and our Lord’s Supper into disrepute (LD 30). Scripture teaches, as also confirmed by current Art. 61 CO, that the elders are responsible for the supervision and admittance to the Lord’s Table. Thus we as a federation have given in to the modernistic practices of liberal churches.

For many, our Lord’s institution no longer serves as the defining model for our Lord’s Supper celebration. The example and symbolism of the unity of His church in sitting together as guests at His table, sharing the wine as a symbol of Christ’s blood and sharing the broken bread as a symbol of His body broken on the cross for us, are being exchanged for individualistic practices of individual cups of various beverages (out of fear for disease, as if our Lord’s institution was flawed and for expediency) often served in the pew, where it is even more difficult to guard the Lord’s table, as required, to prevent non-communicant

members and unknown guests from participating. These changes in format are defended in various ways on the premise that it has been done before (juridical rule of precedence) negating the normative place of God's word. And since some scripture portions are now considered to be just "descriptive" and only others "prescriptive". In this way we can choose to allow the "descriptive" label to be applied to the institution of the Lord's Supper and to other portions of God's word that do not fit with our new perception.

A further sign of deterioration and the weakening authority of God's Word in the CanRC is the increasing formalistic approach to maintaining the subscription to the Three Forms of Unity. In the Act of Liberation we promised to return from the "synodical-hierarchical and the "theological-scholastic" yokes and return to God's word as confessed in the three Forms of Unity. Synod 1965's consideration that "correspondence with Churches abroad (and they included the Americas at that time) should not be entered into, until upon a conscientious and serious investigation, it has become apparent that these Churches not only officially embrace the reformed confession and church polity but also in fact maintain them" (Art. 141, II Synod Edmonton) now seem forgotten. Today we see that the CanRC have E.F. with churches that do not practice confessional membership, accept modern scripture critical exegesis and do not adhere to or maintain the Three Forms of Unity, so that the Subscription form has become a witness against us, since it in reality no longer functions but has become mere formalistic baggage and in actuality the Word of our Lord is not honoured as we confess it in BC Art. 2, 3, 4, and 7. The reports of our Synodical deputies are full of examples that show that "divergencies" once they consider them sufficiently discussed, now lose their urgency and can be discussed at a more opportune time (never?).

The low view of scriptural authority also has gradual impacts on how many now view creation and the "origin of species" in the CanRC. It is happening, in at least some congregations, that members are being advised on their home-visits not to worry that scripture's rendering of creation is being questioned, with the truism that the Bible is not a science book! The pressure to conform to the world is too much for many, especially, when the preaching turns more and more to moralism and the congregations are fed stones for bread. We see this ever so clearly in the GKN/GKv, whom our CanRC synods insist are and will remain our sister churches.

The Reformed churches had long struggled with the impacts of allowing the training for the ministry to be the responsibility of others. Our last synod has also compromised God's Word in this area. The Lord brought the churches of the Secession back, to again obey the scriptural principle that the training for the ministry is to be done by ordained ministers of the Church, appointed and under the authority of the Church or churches collectively. Synod 2007 weakened our stand by only "expressing the strong preference for at least "one" federational seminary". We are now back to before 1834, as a strong preference means next to nothing when training by and for the church is no longer recognized as a scriptural principle. We should all understand that having a seminary of and for the churches will not in itself cause fidelity to God's Word, that will take a substantive return from the path taken, but it is a requirement of scripture, that is to be obeyed.

It is also clear that the Free Reformed Churches in Australia are also being impacted by the changes in the authority of God's word, just as the CanRC. We also read of their decision not to recognize the GKN (Hersteld) and of their refusal to break ties to the GKN/GKv. The FRCA are also willing to take up contacts with churches not maintaining the scriptural standard of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity and thus God's Word.

The move to self-willed and man centered worship, contrary to the 2nd word of the covenant, is also encouraged by the addition of ever more man-centered hymns and thus with less familiarity of the songs of the covenant, given to us by God to use in corporate worship to mold our thoughts. Today we see that members are more likely to be disciplined for daring to disagree with their Council, when attempting to maintain the authority of scripture, confessions, CO and the faithful use of the sacraments; yet sadly others living on the "edge" of the church, in wilful disobedience to God's word in matters of doctrine and life style are too often left to fend for themselves with minimal exhortation or none at all. Members and churches become discouraged and fail to appeal per CO Art. 31, since consistories and broader assemblies so often fail to deal substantively with the material lawfully placed before them.

We may thankfully confess that God will preserve His Church, even as we see that false churches and their leaders become impediments to the faith of her members. We pray that the Lord may give us the discernment to recognize the call of the good shepherd, as revealed in His word, and that that His Spirit may work faith to soften our sinful hearts, that we learn to study and walk in His ways and to give us the courage to act obediently to that call.

Ed Helder

Address to the 2010 Synod (CanRC) at Burlington

By the Rev. John A. Bouwers of the URCNA

12 May 2010

My dear brothers in our one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I count it a high honour that once again I may be here in your midst for the assembly your General Synod. This is now the second time I have had such an honour, having had the privilege of addressing your General Synod Smithers in 2007 as well. So, being something of a veteran, now, I feel a certain familiarity with, and a growing appreciation for your deliberate and deliberative ways.

My own personal experience then at now two of your General Synods also invites certain comparisons, the first one, superficial. I recall that *part* of my thrill of being able to attend Synod Smithers was finally to be able to take in some of the breathtaking beauty of the much talked about Bulkley Valley. Flying in and seeing the spectacular beauty of the Hudson Bay Mountain in the background was certainly a sight to behold. I hope I am not considered rude, then for saying that driving around the QEW to get to Burlington just doesn't seem to have quite the same cachet. The little picture in the promotional material for this Synod (and on our name tags) just doesn't compare with the splendour of the

picture of the Hudson Bay Mountain Synod Smithers was passing around in their promotional packets. In fact, I think that if you look closely today at Burlington's picture I think you can see the plumes and billows of smoke belching out of the smoke stacks at the steel factories.

And indeed perhaps thinking a little bit about pollution, corruption and the effects of sin in the world can serve as something of a helpful metaphor for the challenges we are presently facing as churches on the road to the unity our Saviour enjoins of us, the unity he has prayed for. I do like the caption, theme or slogan, if you will, that Burlington has assigned to this synod: "Linked together in faith." But perhaps we as United Reformed Churches are the kinks in the linkage.

Could it be that under the blessing of God we may continue to move forward together and, as it were, straighten things out on the pathway to greater Unity. To make, as the prophet would say, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. We want to address and encourage you to that end, and we look for you to encourage us, in that same way too.

Brothers I am joined today as fraternal delegate by two other members of our committee for ecumenical relations, Rev. Peter Vellenga and Rev. Harry Zekveld, both local Ontario men. We have also encouraged all of our local pastors to drop in if they are able to witness a Canadian Reformed General Synod first hand, to be encouraged by your careful deliberations.

I don't believe we need too much introduction as United Reformed Churches, thankfully by way of the growing unity we enjoy together as churches we are quite familiar to you by now. I have just a few statistics to give you some idea of what you are dealing with. According to our most recent directory the URCs are now made up of some 112 churches in North America including over 23,000 souls. Of those 112 churches, 38 (34%) are in Canada, or 8,500 souls (37%). Our churches in Canada are largely in areas where your churches are not far away, and our churches in the United States are, obviously, for the most part, in areas where your churches are... not.

That also gives rise to some of the dynamics and challenges of the unity you and we are called to pursue. Brothers, you have read your agenda, reports, recommendations and letters from the churches, you know how much attention unity with the United Reformed requires, and you don't need me to tell you about the challenges and difficulties we are facing. We are at something of a delicate time with regard to the unity process. We are at the point where we see many practical difficulties, where there is fatigue, frustration, and sometimes disillusionment. We see that we don't seem to be gaining momentum but losing it, we seem to be stalled. Brothers, the Lord is testing our mettle, our resolve. Here is where we need tenderness, patience, wisdom, but nevertheless at the same time we still need firm resolve, fortitude and commitment to walk on in obedience to our Saviour.

We are grateful for the recommendations of your Unity Coordinators in their report to the General Synod that are also suggestive of their agreement with this commitment to continue to seek to go forward. We are encouraged by their words to that effect in 6.8 of their report:

Now that we meet hurdles we should not give up on this. Our commitment will show in that we continue to reach out to the URCNA. Our commitment to federative unity should not diminish. Nor should we take back the concessions we made in 2007.

Thank you for those encouragements and brothers please do *continue* to encourage us and reach out to us, and patiently challenge us. Speaking of concessions, we are reminded again, aren't we that the road to unity is the road of give and take. You give, we take. Maybe it seems like that sometimes. I realize there is some concern that has been communicated by some of the churches to this synod that Smithers may have been too concessive. In the providence of God ever since we began this process together in 2001 your synods have been held before ours, and each time decisions regarding unity have been made it might appear that you have made more concessions than we have. And once again this year, the year of our Lord 2010, you are in the same unenviable position of having to lead the way, your synod predating ours by a couple of months.

Perhaps a few things should be said in connection with all of this to put matters into perspective somewhat. First of all, in the providence of God not only do your synods usually fall before ours, but more significantly, you are also our older brothers in Christ, federationally speaking.

You can speak of 60 years of history here in Canada, we are not yet fifteen. You have had 60 years to seek to convince yourselves, and the world, and the churches around you that you do not want to live in isolation, and we appreciate among Canadian Reformed people a strong sense of commitment to our ecumenical calling. We have a different recent history, being much younger, and we are still smarting and nursing our wounds from what we perceived to be hierarchical tendencies in our former denominational connection. So while from the beginning there was among us a strong commitment to a United Reformed body made up of all who hold to a like and precious faith in the Saviour with confessional integrity (that came to expression in our *name* as United Reformed Churches), there nevertheless also lingers among us a fear of where we were, resulting in a hesitancy with regard to unity with the less familiar. Admittedly there is the danger among us of excess, or of overreaction towards new extremes of congregationalism, and perhaps it might even be said that it is time for us to grow up, but it is what it is.

We would also say, in regards to concessions that, the nature of the unity you already enjoy among yourselves (even to the point of much uniformity) is such that it is inevitable if unity is to go forward that more concessions come from your side. We, as United Reformed Churches are already a broader umbrella, you might say. There is a broader diversity of practices and even of theological perspectives among us than exists among your churches. The cost of unity for you may well have to come at the price of

some of that uniformity. I don't believe that that means everything, or perhaps even much of anything, would have to change among the churches that are presently Canadian Reformed, because potentially all of what you are can function under a bigger umbrella, and be greatly beneficial towards the well-being of that umbrella. The ongoing challenge for us is to seek to understand together from out of the Scriptures and our confessions, whether our umbrella is too large, reaching out and embracing and giving shelter to unconfessional practices or ideas, or whether at times it might not be opened up high enough and far enough, not including what the confessions would allow.

Uniformity, it needs to be admitted, can be an impediment toward unity. Uniformity can also be unity that is only skin deep. Sometimes a greater sense of unity, a more profound unity comes about when there is, if I may use this term a *scriptural* multiformity (as opposed to a *sinful* pluriformity) among the churches, because that unity roots in Christ. I doubt whether any of you men drove across the prairies to get here, but as beautiful as the vistas can be there (I'm thinking later in the season – of acres upon acres of golden ripening grain, yellow canola, blue flax), I have also become partial to the multiform beauty we see round about us here in the Golden Horseshoe, the Niagara Peninsula, with all its diversity of terrain, blossoming peaches, cherries, belching smoke stacks of the steel factories notwithstanding. Let us learn among the texture of greater diversity to see and perceive our deep unity in Christ within the bounds of our confessions.

We believe that in addition to foundational directives towards unity we read together from Scripture, it should also be said that we *need* each other. Brothers, we like to believe that the unity process, marred as it has been by our own sin and shortcomings, disappointing as it has been in terms of its progress, has been deeply beneficial for both federations. Already, I think we can see that when we look around. Let us thank God brothers for the openness we have come to enjoy, for the recognition we have witnessed on each other's pulpits, we share the same commitments. For the young people who are being raised in an environment of acceptance where there used to be hostility. Thank God brothers. We thank God for the great ecumenical strides we have witnessed the Canadian Reformed Churches take over the course of these last ten years, we are so glad to stand beside you in NAPARC as well as the ICRC and look forward, with you, to continuing to challenge all of the fellow churches of NAPARC to live up to the basis and constitution which says that we will continually "hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice."

Brothers, in the report of your unity coordinators it is also acknowledged in 6.8 that "it is clear that our progress toward federative unity with the URCNA is not going as well we had hoped." Then the brothers assert: "We believe that this is to a great extent due to the decisions of Schererville." Let us say, we ought to be able to acknowledge as churches, perhaps we were not as sensitive as we ought to have been with regards to how those decisions would have been perceived by you in light of your own history in 1944.

Perhaps we could also challenge you as churches to put your own hands into your own bosoms to acknowledge that the difficulties being experienced today can also be attributed to your *reaction* to the decisions of Schererville, reading them through *only* the

lenses of what happened 1944 without an appreciation for the challenges of our own day that our churches were seeking to address.

Brothers we need to be challenged by you too, and we certainly need to grow in humility, but for you to have the sense that all of our difficulties stem from actions on the URC side vis-à-vis the decisions of Schererville, we would humbly suggest it betrays either a naïveté or a certain lack of self-awareness from your side. We say it in all humility.

We want to emphasize strongly today our earnest desire to have your body agree to the proposal to open up the floor of your synod to a time of dialogue with the representatives of our churches, the proposal that initiated with your church at Lincoln, ON. We cannot stress strongly enough how important we believe this will be. The reference we have made in the past in our dealings together at the committee level to the endings of both 2nd and 3rd John is entirely apropos here:

I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

I can assure you that the Apostle John would recommend face to face communication over blogging every time!

Brothers over the years, almost invariably, and in regards to the work of the various committees, every time we have dialogued face to face we have made great strides together. I do not think it is yet appreciated how much progress was made for the cause of unity in January of this year when finally after their questions had remained outstanding and unanswered for five years,

Classis SW US in California received a visit from Drs. Jerry Visscher and Jason Van Vliet. I don't think you appreciate either just how detrimental it had been to the cause of unity up until that point that those questions had been left unanswered. The reports we have received as a result of the January dialogue were glowingly positive (unfortunately that's something that didn't come out when the content of what these brothers said was reported in the periodicals). A mutual appreciation was gained for the contexts out of which our respective concerns arise.

These professors of the theological college acquitted themselves very well, and a large contributor to the success was their face to face presence, and the fellowship enjoyed before and after the classis. Our URC brother, Rev. Harry Zekveld, who was present in January to witness the event reported concerning the two Canadian Reformed brothers:

“both of them spoke very ably,... [they] shined in terms of pastoral sensitivity and clear desire to hear the concerns. Both brothers modeled the power of debating in a Christian manner.

Dr. Visscher reported that he and his colleague “appreciated the opportunity to get to know more about [the classis SWUS] approach and certainly have more appreciation for

it now. Also better awareness for their background as they do for ours. These kinds of gatherings are very important.”

Brothers, *great* progress was made! We want to replicate that kind of success and progress on the floors of our respective synods. In addition to being willing to answer some of the concerns of your churches in your presence and to enter into some dialogue with you on some of the matters, we have also brought with us the questions our churches have submitted to be addressed by your men at our synod. If you allow for a bit of the kind of discussion as Lincoln has proposed, you will lead the way for a similar opportunity to be granted at our synod. You may have the advantage of formulating a synodical letter to our synod in light of the discussions here, but as the apostle John would argue, in addition to and better than pen and ink is the face to face.

Due to the nature of delegation at our Synods, if you lead the way in this way, when our synod comes along you will have opportunity to address representatives of every URC consistory to alleviate concerns, address caricatures, put fears to rest, etc. We expect the same kind of fruitful and forward-moving interchange has almost always been experienced in face to face dialogue.

Brothers, I trust you would agree that we cannot go backwards, we must go forward. We must be wise and we must be patient, but we must go forward. I was deeply encouraged, humbled and challenged, but indeed encouraged by the exhortation and prayers at your opening prayer service this week. Indeed, as in Nehemiah chapter 1, may we continue our work prayerfully, in a spirit of conscious, penitent dependence, confident of the Lord’s covenant faithfulness, even as we were also encouraged in the inspired words of the Apostle Paul at the end of Ephesians 3. Let’s take them to heart:

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Article 43 - Meeting with the URCNA

Taken from the Internet version of the Acts (CanRC.org)

[The final printed version of the Acts will be considered the official version]

1. Material

1.1 The main Report of the Ecclesiastical Unity Coordinators submitted to General Synod

Burlington 2010 (8.2.a.i).

1.2 Supplementary Letter of the Coordinators Church Unity of the Canadian Reformed Churches (8.2.a.ii).

1.3 Letters from the Churches at Hamilton-Providence (8.3.a.1), Toronto-Bethel (8.3.a.2), Fergus -Maranatha (8.3.a.5), Flamborough (8.2.a.6), Neerlandia (8.2.a.7), Ancaster (8.2.a.11), Burlington-Ebenezer (8.2.a.3), Edmonton-Immanuel (8.2.a.4), Glanbrook (8.2.a.10), Abbotsford (8.2.a.12), Barrhead (8.2.a.17) and Cloverdale (8.2.a.16).

2. Observations

2.1 In their main report the Coordinators mention that the members of the ecumenical relations committees of both churches met together from Oct. 30-31, 2008 in Hamilton. They state that this was “the second time the two committees sat around the table together.” Furthermore, they remark that “the meeting was characterized by a warm, frank, and brotherly exchange of questions and answers.” They add: “it is helpful for brothers in the Lord to come face-to-face.”

2.2 In their main report the Coordinators refer to a proposal from the Church at Lincoln about “face to face meetings between the delegates of our respective synods and representatives of our respective federations, where the concerns and questions could be presented, and responses could be received.” The Coordinators recommend in 7.3 of their Report that this proposal of Lincoln be implemented.

2.3 In their Supplementary Report the Coordinators report that they were invited to a face-to-face meeting by Classis Southwest of the URCNA meeting in Escondido, CA on January 19-20, 2010. In their stead Drs. J.P. Van Vliet and G.H. Visscher visited this Classis and answered quite a number of outstanding questions. The Coordinators attach both the questions asked and the answers given to their report.

2.4 The following churches express their agreement with *all* the recommendations of the coordinators report: Hamilton-Providence, Toronto-Bethel, Fergus-Maranatha, Flamborough, Neerlandia, and Ancaster.

2.5 The following churches express their agreement with the recommendations of the coordinators report, with the exception of recommendation 7.3 – the proposal of Lincoln: Attercliff, Burlington-Ebenezer, Edmonton-Immanuel, Glanbrook, Abbotsford, Barrhead and Cloverdale.

2.6 The Church at Winnipeg-Redeemer endorses recommendation 7.3.

2.7 Burlington-Ebenezer does not support this recommendation for two reasons:

2.7.1 Ecclesiastical unity should only be sought and implemented on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions.

2.7.2 Such face to face meetings are impractical given the nature of synods and especially for the URCNA, the limited time available.

2.8 Edmonton-Immanuel does not support the same for the following reasons. Given the short time frame before General Synod, the proposal of Lincoln would not be a practical solution as many churches would not have time or take the ‘opportunity to respond; the problem is that either federation may not be well represented using this model. We should strive to have discussions at the formal (written) level, rather than informally between a select few representatives and Synod delegates.

2.9 Glanbrook does not support the same for the following reason. Their concern is that the proposal from Lincoln is premature considering this statement from committee on page 15 of their report: “it would be more beneficial to deal with these matters in light of the decisions of the next Synod of the URCNA (London).”

2.10 Attercliffe questions the wisdom of recommendation 7.3 stating that its validity is countered by consideration 6.4 where the committee doubts the value and status of face-to-face meetings.

2.11 Barrhead expresses concern about recommendation of 7.3 to implement the proposal of Lincoln as they do find the idea of a “public discussion” at this stage of our communication with the URCNA open to being volatile and counter-productive.

2.12 Abbotsford suggests that Synod seriously consider the option of having a session together with the URCNA Synod which is to meet a few months later in London. The reasons for this suggestion are: costs are not prohibitive, a combined session purely for the purposes of understanding each other better (asking the questions Lincoln is asking for) could give more clarity on what the URCNA as a federation wants, and while the written word is important, face to face meetings have their own value (2 John 12; 3 John 13-14.)

3. Considerations

3.1 The Coordinators Report indicates that the face-to-face meetings that our ecumenical committee had in the past with the URCNA committee have been helpful and not at all impractical, volatile or counter-productive. Furthermore, from the URCNA representatives present at Synod Burlington, plus the address of the Rev. J. Bouwers of the URCNA, we learned that the Escondido face-to-face meeting at which Drs. J.P. Van Vliet and G.H. Visscher were present was extremely helpful in answering outstanding questions and clearing up misunderstandings.

3.2 In view of the success of these previous face-to-face meetings, there is value in Synod Burlington giving serious consideration to taking the same approach.

3.3 No proof is given that such an approach undermines the fact that unity is ultimately based on Scripture and confession.

3.4 While the Coordinators believe that official reaction to the Nine Statements of Schererville should wait until after Synod London, they support a face-to-face meeting on other outstanding issues.

3.5 A number of churches submitted a list of questions which would make a face-to-face meeting at this time beneficial.

3.6 While it is true that the time frame we are working with is limited, there are sufficient questions from both sides for such a meeting to prove beneficial. At the same time it may be possible in the future to have more face-to-face meetings in various places to answer questions and clear up misunderstandings. All of this does not come in the place of formal or structured discussions.

3.7 The Church at Attercliffe misunderstands the thrust of the Coordinators remarks for while they are reluctant to speak on behalf of the whole federation, they see the merit of a face-to-face meeting and thus support the proposal of Lincoln.

3.8 The Church at Abbotsford strongly supports a face-to-face meeting; however, it suggests that Synod adjourn and meet again later. The costs and time commitments, however, make such a meeting impractical, especially at this late juncture.

4. Recommendation

That Synod decide:

4.1 To support the proposal of the Church at Lincoln, taken over by the Coordinators for a face-to-face meeting between the members of Synod and delegates from the United Reformed Churches.

4.2 To set aside at least one hour on Wednesday evening, May 19, 2010 for delegates from the United Reformed Churches to answer questions submitted to them by the churches and delegates.

4.3 To delegate the coordinators along with Drs J.P. Van Vliet and G.H. Visscher to represent the Canadian Reformed Churches at a similar session proposed for the Synod of the United Reformed Churches that will meet in London, Ontario in July of 2010.

ADOPTED

How has Synod Burlington Dealt with the URCNA?

Synod Burlington has not even come to a close and already the assessment of its work begins. We realize that only the printed Acts will be the approved and final version. Still, the thrust of the decisions regarding unity with the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) will not change. And there is strong interest among many members in Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), as can be noted from the many letters from churches to the Synod about this topic, and how frequently the subject comes up in conversations.

In the last three to four years a number of obstacles have been raised that prevent progress in the discussions toward federative unity. Synod Burlington of the CanRC has received reports of the work done by several committees that have dealt with URCNA

delegates in trying to make progress in these efforts. These reports have come via the Ecclesiastical Unity Coordinators appointed by the previous CanRC Synod at Smithers. Synod Burlington has also received numerous letters from individual churches in the CanRC federation dealing with the talks that have taken place with the URCNA. Finally, Synod has also heard from a representative of the entire URCNA; Rev. John A. Bouwers of Jordan, ON, represented the URCNA and addressed Synod Burlington in plenary session. The full text has been presented earlier in this edition of Reformed Polemics.

The URCNA, in the words of Rev. Bouwers, suggested, “We would also say, in regards to concessions that, the nature of the unity you already enjoy among yourselves (even to the point of much uniformity) is such that it is inevitable if unity is to go forward that more concessions come from your side.” Are we prepared for that?

The CanRC reports to Synod all speak of lack of progress in the discussions toward federative unity due to apparent differences in the biblical view of the covenant and justification. With these developments being what they are, many in the CanRC wonder about the commitment of the URCNA to proceed with unity discussions. As the CanRC struggles with the view of the covenant as understood by the URCNA, the URCNA on their turn are reluctant to continue discussions because of the CanRC view of the covenant. Things have not changed from 1944.

As most of us know the discussion with respect to the covenant came about when it was introduced by a weekend study session that came to be known as the Federal Vision. One might be tempted to ask, whence comes this interference by something called the Federal Vision? Surely all reformed believers agree that nothing comes by chance and that the Lord is in control of all things. Some in the CanRC have said that this issue does not live among the churches any more, so why raise confusion. But it appears that this is not the way the Lord wants to deal with it. Should we not be open to the thought that He is asking the CanRC why, having been freed from this error only seventy years ago, are we prepared to deny what we have learned to be the Scriptural view of the covenant? Would it not be sinful to ignore His reforming hand for the sake of unity so soon? What happened to the idea of “in isolation lies our strength?”

It is in this atmosphere that Synod Burlington observed all the material it received and considered the material before coming to recommendations that were adopted. For now we only have space and time to deal with some of the discussion, but we will address some of the main points of the discussion and decisions.

As a result of a statement made by the URCNA Synod 2001 with respect to the days of creation one of the CanRC churches urged Synod 2004 to request clarification about the standing of the URCNA on the Framework Hypothesis. After promising a letter of explanation, the only response that was finally offered Synod Burlington 2010 was that they stand by the statement made in 2001. This can only lead to a CanRC conclusion that the URCNA do not want to discipline those in their midst who teach the Framework Hypothesis.

With respect to the Committee's report on how to proceed with unity discussions with the URCNA, six churches expressed agreement with the report. On the other hand twelve churches suggested/requested Synod to deal differently than the committee suggested. Reg. Synod East of the CanRC (RSE) requested Synod Burlington to enquire with the June Synod of the URCNA if the Nine Points of Schererville are confessionally binding. The Church at Neerlandia requested the same thing. The Church at Glanbrook suggested that the URCNA synod in London should be given opportunity to retract the "Nine Points". The Church at Abbotsford can not agree with the wording of Point 6 of the "Nine Points". The Church at Lincoln requests that the doctrines of covenant and baptism be clarified and that "we review our commitment to work together in this light." Redeemer Church in Winnipeg asked the CanRC synod to ask the URNCA to declare that the "Nine Points" do not have confessionally binding authority on office bearers. The Church at Cloverdale requested that the URCNA retract the "Nine Points". The Church at Attercliffe explained that the "Nine Points" "contend against covenant theology which had become binding and caused the Liberation of 1944. They consider them to be binding pastoral advice as per their context and thus both a supra-scriptural and supra-confessional binding. Thus they see point 6 as an impediment to further unity."

In short, there is strong sentiment that the "Nine Points" have awakened a wrong understanding of the covenant among many in the URCNA. This has led many CanRC churches to express warnings and advised against further discussions until these matters can be discussed and agreed upon.

However, Synod Burlington continues in the vane of previous synods, giving the impression that none of the issues should be obstacles for further unity. Even though seemingly immovable objects have arisen, Synod mandated the coordinators and committees to proceed with the mandate to seek federative unity. Some matters are raised for discussion, but the point that some of the differences are deal breakers does not come through at all in the final decisions and mandate. Synod phrased the question much more broadly and continues to portray a conciliatory stance. This continuous compromising stands over against the Biblical mandate to seek unity in the truth.

Synod Burlington had the opportunity to explain to the URCNA that federative unity remains a Biblical mandate that the CanRC wishes to answer to, but that at the same time it is not in the picture, and ecclesiastical fellowship is in danger as long as:

- The Framework Hypothesis is permitted to be taught by members of the URCNA
- The nine points of Schererville are considered acceptable doctrine in the URCNA

At the beginning of this issue of Reformed Polemics brother E Helder warned us that the Canadian Reformed Churches, as a federation, are at a critical juncture in their history. Synod Burlington 2010 will be a decisive watershed. Either the federation will collectively awaken, return and reform or she will continue on her current path away from her roots, away from her basis: the Word of God. Although many churches see the error of the decisions taken in the past decade, Synod does not appear to have heeded this sentiment sufficiently and has not warned the URCNA strongly enough that we as CanRC want to remain true to the word of God, even if it costs us unity. PdB