

### **A COMMON CONFESSION (1)**

When we discuss the basis of Christian unity we note that God's Word must remain the norm for our ecumenical thinking and acting. We must pay close attention to the divine rules as prescribed for the execution of our ecumenical calling. From Scripture we learn that true ecumenicity deals with and aims at unity in Christ. Therefore in our ecumenical endeavours we must strive to make visible the relationship, which exists in Christ, between those who believe in him.

“He being the way, the true believers find the way to their unity in Him. Furthermore, the unity in Christ is a unity in Him as the truth. So it is quite evident from Scripture that the unity in Christ is made manifest in a unanimous and faithful confession of the truth” (2)

The Confessional Standards of the Church are therefore very important in connection with true ecumenicity. In a brochure of the Dutch Committee for Churches Abroad we read the following: “In the continuing struggle to keep their congregation in the unity of Christ the Reformed churches of various countries have obtained their confessional standards. They have received these standards as a gift from the hand of God, for it was He Who enlightened them through the working of the Holy Spirit to recapitulate in thankfulness and obedience what they had first found in Scripture. Subsequently these standards served then as an agreement of fellowship in the Lord and Saviour.

These Reformed churches continued to accept and defend their standards as being fully in conformity with the truth revealed unto us by God in His Word.

This attitude towards their confessional writings will strongly influence the manner in which Reformed churches meet the ecumenical calling. They are not permitted to forget their allegiance to their standards when contacts are made with churches abroad. If, more or less, they would forget, then not only no justice is done to what in their own congregation is maintained as divine truth, but also, sooner or later within these churches the loyalty to their standards will be endangered.

Any confessional standard, which is no longer always and everywhere dealt with in all seriousness, is by that very fact undermined and drained of its vitality and power of being a binding consensus.

It is for this reason that ecumenical fellowship is possible only when cooperating churches can honestly declare with regard to each other's confessional standards, that they are in conformity with the Word of God. In no other way can form be given to the obedience to the first rule of ecumenicity that it shall serve unity and truth.

There is, however, more to be said here. The churches, cooperating in ecumenical fellowship, must also have the mutual confidence that they all sincerely maintain their standards and live up to them. In all these churches there must be an unreserved and reliable subscription to the standards. They have to make sure that in all these churches there is faithful doctrinal discipline, in order that the unity of faith may be maintained against error and also that the flock of Christ be protected... Where falsehood in doctrine is tolerated the Lord of all truth is dishonoured and the congregation destroyed.” (3)

Those who wish to safeguard the truth of the gospel are often mistakenly perceived as being anti-ecumenical. Nothing could be further from the truth. The point is that without agreement upon this truth to unify, any relationship is meaningless and without purpose. The starting point for finding others who are “like us” is shared faith and a common confession. “The unity of the church... is always a unity born out of mutual submission, to the one Word of God as this is expressed in terms of a common confession.” (4) Let us together by means of our common confession continue to say “Only the Word.”

Let us show, in our ecumenical endeavours, that we believe what we confess and also confess what we believe.

**Ron Dykstra**

- (1) Taken from Information, Jan. 2, 1993
- (2) For the Sake of True Ecumenicity. The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, 1982
- (3) IBID
- (4) Dr. C. S. Venema (Clarion Dec. 4, 1992)

A LETTER
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Dear Editors:

I have been reading your new magazine with some interest as well as concern. I agree that there is a great and deep need to defend the place of the Three Forms of Unity in the life of the Churches and along with many who write for your magazine, I too love the Church Order of Dort. I would like to respond, however, to some things written about Presbyterian Church government and confession.

Rev. P. K. A. de Boer states that an Erastian form of church government is rule by elders. (Vol.1, no.9, pg. 4) Nothing could be further from the truth. This is not a matter of interpretation but of definition. The Erastian form of government maintains the supremacy of the civil magistrate in the rule of the church. Erastus taught that the state had the final say in all matters of church government.

It was the final judge even in matters of discipline and excommunication. This was the position of the Arminians in Holland. The Church Order of Dort was, in part, a response to their position. The Presbyterian form of government is rule by elders, as its name indicates (by elders; by presbyters). The independents in England had rejected completely any authority of the state in church matters. Gathered together at the Westminster Assembly, the English churches, on the one hand, rejected the idea that the state may take authority to administer Word, sacraments, or discipline, and yet, on the other hand, rejected the independentist’s position by granting that the civil magistrate could call synods and be present at them. Though we would disagree with this final position we cannot call it ‘Erastian’.

I do agree with Rev. de Boer, however, that the Church Order of Dort (which I too, love) strives to defend the churches against hierarchy.

We should not, however, lay the charge against the Presbyterian form of government as necessarily leading to hierarchy. As any Canadian Reformed Catechism student knows full well, the Church Order of Dort did not save the churches in Holland from hierarchy in the last four centuries. Time and again a synodical pope has raised its hand above the pages of the Church Order of Dort and ruled the churches with a fist of iron.

Granted, those synods did not live by the spirit of the Church Order of Dort, but we must be willing to admit that the Church Order of Dort is no fail safe defense against hierarchy. The Reformed churches of the continent have been, on the whole, no more successful in keeping hierarchy out of the church than the Presbyterians. Hierarchy stays out of the church by maintaining faithfulness to the Word of God and to the Confessions of the church as well as with tireless vigilance against the little pope in all of us.

The accusation from Reformed people that Presbyterian church government leads to hierarchy is simply a matter of the pot calling the kettle black.

I also would like to take issue with PdB (Vol.1, No.9). He reminds his readers that the Christian religion does not consist of essential and non-essential doctrines. To this, Reformed confessors will agree. He uses the example of infant baptism as his platform.

Of course we will agree that the doctrine of infant baptism is essential. This is one of the hallmarks of Reformed doctrine. But I would think that Br. de Boer is out of line when he, by insinuation, suggests that the Westminster Standards do not teach infant baptism, or at least leads to that position. No, Br. de Boer does not say this in so many words but the insinuation stands. We should, however, note that both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms maintain the children of believers who are members of the church and of the covenant (!) are to be baptized. Perhaps anecdotal evidence that infant baptism is not administered in a church claiming to be in submission to the Westminster Standards can be brought forward but that does not in itself condemn those standards. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that baptism is a sacrament and a sign and seal of the covenant of grace and that not only those that do actually confess faith in Jesus Christ, and profess obedience to Him, but also the infants on one or both believing parents, are to be baptized.

Br. de Boer would do well to note that the consistent historical position of our Reformed fathers has been to acknowledge that the Westminster Standards were and are Reformed. He writes as if the fact that the churches have “accepted the Westminster Standards as a truly Reformed confession” is something new. We should understand, rather, that if we judge the Westminster Standards as unreformed (and some will say we must do that) then we must also be prepared to admit that we no longer stand in line with those who came before us in the Reformed church which both br. de Boer and I love. If we reject the Westminster Standards we must admit that we stand in judgment of our fathers. We must be willing to say that for 350 years the Reformed church of our fathers has been wrong. The present day rejection of the Westminster Standards by Reformed confessors must be seen for what it is. It is an invention by a few who claim to be conservative even while they introduce a novel idea into the churches.

The Canadian Reformed Churches as early as 1965, acknowledged the Westminster Standards as truly Reformed. In so doing our fathers on this continent only did what their fathers had done before. In 1965 the Synod considered, on the basis of a report (partially published with the Acts) that further discussion with the OPC was warranted. The considerations for this decision to proceed state, in part (in my loose translation), "that out of the report it is apparent that the OPC is, as a Presbyterian Church, a fruit of the Calvinist Reformation and that it maintains confessions and church order that have a Calvinist character." Outside the particular discussion of our contacts with the OPC we should note that our fathers who lived through and experienced the reformation of 1944 were the very ones who made this judgment about the Westminster Standards and a Presbyterian form of government. It is historically inconsistent to say that the Westminster Standards impinge on the principles of 1944 when those who were there in 1944 judge this not to be the case. In the report published in the 1965 Acts, which was placed there by the decision of Synod, it says: "the Presbyterian Church as it was organized during the time of the Reformation was TRUE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST (emphasis in the original) maintaining the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments and strict discipline to punish the sinner."

This is not a novel position! And it simply means that churches of the Lord that are faithful to the Westminster Standards can be true churches. This was the position of the Reformed Church, the Secession Churches, the Union Churches, and the Vrijgemakte Churches and now since 1965, it has been the position of the Canadian Reformed Churches. As a conservative Reformed confessor I wish to listen carefully to our fathers who came before us and carefully study their position, before I am prepared to reject what they have said. I am loathe to abandon my Reformed heritage or to go against the judgment of my Reformed fathers. It is my desire and the desire of many others in the Canadian Reformed Churches to conserve and preserve our Reformed heritage, not to toss it overboard. I, for one, do not wish to adopt new and novel ways. Those who want to reject the Westminster Standards as unreformed should not either.

If, on the other hand, in the particular instance of the OPC, some want the Canadian Reformed Churches to decide that it is a false church, then say so. Bring forward the evidence in appeal to Synod, and have the churches state unequivocally that either Synod 1977 was wrong or that the OPC has deviated in the last 18 years and so no longer is in line with the Presbyterian Church of the time of the Reformation. Let us then, by the judgment of the Scripture and the Reformed Confessions, rightly evaluate the evidence presented. And if it be determined that they no longer are true churches, let us then tell those Presbyterians that they have deviated from the faith and confession of their fathers and that they are false churches. If they are true churches, then let us not only be seen to have Reformed confessions, but be seen to live by them and enter into fellowship with them. This is the language of our confessions and church order.

We must remember, however, that the weight of Reformed church history and the scriptural and confessional judgment which our fathers have made for centuries testifies firmly against those who wish to say that the Westminster Standards and a Presbyterian Form of Government in themselves necessarily make a church which adheres and subscribes to them a false church.

Greetings from Ottawa, Rev. John Van Popta

A response will be provided in the next issue. Editors!

**THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A TRUE CHURCH**

A bit of history of doctrine will afford an example. Inspired Paul taught salvation by the sovereign grace of God, and he taught it without the slightest compromise. God the Father chose His own from eternity. He did it sovereignly, without regard to any foreseen good in them. God the Son by His passive and active obedience merited salvation for the elect so fully that precisely nothing is left for them to merit. And saving faith, by which they lay hold on the Saviour and all His benefits, is the sovereign gift of the Holy Spirit. That is the Pauline doctrine of salvation, and it constitutes the very heart, not only of the teaching of that apostle, but of the whole scripture. By the fifth century it was lost almost entirely out of sight. Then the Spirit of truth girded St. Augustine to reassert it. Before long it was again eclipsed, and almost complete darkness settled down upon the church.

But in the sixteenth century Luther, Calvin, Knox and others, aroused by the Spirit of truth, once more boldly proclaimed salvation by grace. Soon this precious truth was again compromised, this time by the synergists in Lutheran circles and the Remonstrants in Holland. But vanquished it never was. In the nineteenth century it was upheld unswervingly by a whole constellation of brilliant Reformed theologians - among them the Hodges and Warfields in America, Kuyper and Bavinck in the Netherlands. Today the churches that hold unqualifiedly to the scriptural teaching of salvation by grace are few and far between and withal so small as to be almost negligible. Yet the Reformed faith, of which this truth is the very essence, is still found in the church of Christ. It always will be. The Spirit of truth will see to that.

**Christian Renewal - Sept.25, 1989**

**REPORT OF THE C.R.U.C.S. RETREAT**

On February 23-25, 1995, the Canadian Reformed University and College Students (CRUCS) Fellowship held its second annual retreat at the Evans Lake Forestry Center, near Squamish, B.C. About 45 people, mostly students from local post-secondary institutions attended. Several people attended from places as far away as the B.C. interior, the Smithers/Houston area, and Coaldale and Edmonton, Alberta. There were also several people who were not students, but decided to attend out of interest.

They were of course welcome.

On Friday morning, (the 24 ) Wes Bredenhof, from Edmonton, gave a speech entitled "Introduction to Reformed Apologetics". Wes is studying in Edmonton with a view to entering the ministry, and is well known for his many articles in "In Holy Array". He started out by saying that apologetics is the making of a defense of one's faith, and went on to quote a definition from a book by C. VanTil

on the subject, which defines apologetics as “the vindication of Christian philosophy of life against various non-Christian philosophies of life.” What follows in italics is a brief summary of his speech:

*Apologetics serves three main functions: to use rational arguments to support Christianity; to defend faith from the attacks of unbelievers; and to attack the “foolishness of unbelieving thought”. Apologetics is Scriptural, Paul uses it both when speaking to the people of Jerusalem after his arrest, and when appearing before King Agrippa, and is in fact required by Scripture. I Peter 3: 15: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”*

Here he went on to give a discussion of the history of apologetics, starting with the time of the Roman Catholic Church, and went on to give a relatively detailed discussion how the Reformed Church views both God and man, quoting both from the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession.

*Presuppositional apologetics works by pointing out to an unbeliever that he has certain presuppositions, and that he is in fact living in contraction to those suppositions. For while he would suppose himself to be autonomous, independent, and in control of his own destiny, yet the unbeliever holds to certain laws of science and morality without realizing that he is being inconsistent. He needs to be shown that only by giving up his independence, and learning to trust in God, while obeying his laws, do things make sense. A direct argument of facts, Biblical or otherwise, will seldom be successful, since an unbeliever presupposes Christianity to be false. Rather, an indirect argument, showing the inconsistencies of his lifestyle, and the argument that a Christian world view is self-consistent should be used. An unbeliever may be uncertain as to the existence of a God, yet he cannot prove that there is not one, so he cannot even be certain in his uncertainty.*

He concluded by stating that we have to remember that the unbeliever we are speaking with is a person, and must be treated with gentleness and love (I Peter 3:15). We may be an instrument of God’s, but in the end, it is He who changes the heart. Since the speech was almost three hours long, this summary attempts to capture only a few of the most important themes of the speech, which was very detailed and well reasoned. After the speech we listened to a tape of a debate between an atheist and a Christian apologist over the existence of God. It gave us an opportunity to hear apologetics in practice, and was quite entertaining to listen to. We then had a discussion of the speech, and went into a workshop, where everyone was split into groups of about six people to discuss an article trying to show that there is no God, and to attempt to show where the article was inconsistent using the techniques shown in the speech and on the tape.

On Saturday morning, we had an opportunity to listen to a speech by Mrs. Jane deGlint, editor of The Information magazine, entitled “Of Doubts and Devils”. She started out her speech with a short story describing the struggles of a young minister fighting a devil who was trying to make him take advantage of his position as pastor over people who needed his help. She went on to say that devils

are not abstract entities dating back from a people who didn't know better, but are a powerful force in the battle for our souls. As before, a summary of her speech will be given in italics.

*We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his host, who have a terrible array of weapons against us. Satan is the father of doubts, and likes to use our pride and self confidence to sow seeds of doubt.*

*He prefers obscurity, so that people don't realize what they are fighting, or even that they are fighting a battle. Since the time of people like Descartes, philosophy has been elevated above theology, and reason above faith.*

*Once reason has been elevated over faith, doubt can creep in, and one doubt leads quickly to another. Apologetics is use of reason to defend one's faith rationally and in fact all human theories rest on faith at one level or another. In times of crisis, man needs the certainty of faith, and in fact only God can answer doubts. He reveals answers to doubts to the childlike, but will hide them from the learned. The only weapon that we have against which Satan is powerless is prayer.*

*Faith is the anchor of the soul, giving believers stability in difficult times. Psychologists deny the existence of faith, and label religion as "opium for the masses", and "stagnation of intellectual advancement". She says however, that faith can be a powerful tool in the hands of Christian psychologists who understand how a Christian's mind works. She goes on to give a list of the various stages of faith that people go through from birth to death, and discusses the way that faith can be used in counseling.*

*Satan has infiltrated all levels of society, and he dulls our senses to make us accept the lie, so that he can lead us into his camp. Doubt and forgetfulness are major weapons of the enemy, since doubting is a spiritual sickness which leads to denial.*

*When doubts arise in our hearts, we must be prepared to discuss them and put them into words, for once they are formulated, they become a reality which can be combated. We are unable to help ourselves, and we need to be rescued, but if we confront our difficulties honestly, the Spirit is always there to give us strength in times of weakness.*

After the speech, we once again had an opportunity to ask questions of the speaker, and then had a very interesting discussion on points raised in the speech. The discussion centered on devils and how they can affect us personally, the reality of the occult, and fighting personal doubts.

Besides attending speeches, people had opportunities to go canoeing, hiking, fishing, and other outdoor activities. There were large campfires both evenings and many songs were sung around the fires, there was an afternoon hot dog and marshmallow roast around a bonfire, and two exciting games of Capture the Flag were organized. In addition, many smaller group games were played through out the weekend, and people had the opportunity to meet many new people, or get reacquainted with people that they hadn't seen in a long time. An interesting enjoyable time of fellowship was had by all who attended, and we are already looking forward to next year.

Harold Dykstra