

THE FOURTH FORM OF UNITY?

Those who are unhappy with the unity established with the Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Korea - Kosin, as well as with the decisions concerning the OPC are often made out to be in disagreement with the fact that the Westminster Standards are a reformed confession. Rev. J van Popta also made this point in a letter recently published in RP.

It is correct that most, if not all, who are unhappy with these recent decisions base this on the divergencies between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. This does not yet mean that the Westminster Standards are deemed unreformed. It can be agreed that there are approximately thirteen reformed confessions, Confessions which grew out of the Reformation. Yet there is unhappiness that stems from the fact that the Westminster Standards are not merely deemed to be reformed, but that they are considered to be the fourth form of unity.

Even though comments can sometimes be heard that say, "You don't have to subscribe to them, you know", it still remains fact that as a federation we have decided to become one with those holding to the Westminster Standards. At the same time we continue to admit that there are divergencies between them and our Three Forms of Unity.

The Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC) also referred to this dilemma when it informed Synod 1992 that "In our opinion, the OPC seeks to maintain fraternal relations between our churches, and uses the contact to discuss matters of common interest. Our mandate charges us with the continued discussion of issues of mutual concern in the hope of resolving the divergencies which prevent a closer relationship."

For, at least, twenty years our Synods have heard from contact committees and consistories that there are doctrinal matters of concern in our discussions with the OPC. These relate to their confession and church government. These same areas of concern must therefore also be investigated when dealing with other Presbyterian churches such as the Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Korea- Kosin. One of the areas where there is difference is in the matter of definition of the church. The CCOPC noted this when they mentioned the difference in approach to unity in the quote above.

While the OPC seeks a loose relationship, we, because of our denial of the pluriformity of the Church, seek union. In our eagerness for unity we have submitted to their challenge to be pronounced true. But because we are afraid to challenge them about their pluriform concept of the Church we minimize that difference and allow this view to also penetrate into our community.

The CCOPC in its evaluation section 4.1 states: "We have not dealt with some of the other divergencies: the doctrine of the covenant, visible and invisible church, the assurance of faith, the observance of the law, as well as church-political differences." They state that this was due mainly to lack of time.

Although the committee admits to only discussing two areas of doctrinal divergence (Fencing of the Lord's Supper and Confessional Membership) in which no satisfactory agreement could be reached. Synod decided "B. To conclude from previous Synods' decisions that the divergencies evaluated in 1971 and 1986 have been sufficiently discussed to confirm that these are not impediments to ecclesiastical fellowship..." (Acts 1992 V.B, pg.55). The trail of logic that is described in the Consideration on page 53, point 3 a,b,c,d is too long to repeat but bears reading. It

certainly is not a clear direction for confessional members of the church who must learn to understand how to deal with divergencies that Committees for Contact and a number of consistories have described as being serious enough to be impediments to full unity.

The decision of Synod 1992 hangs much of its logic on the fact that in spite of continuing differences it was never decided to discontinue the pursuit of closer unity.

Much frustration exists among OPC and Reformed churches and members because of the prolonged “discussions” without ever coming to a conclusion. Such frustration is justified, but the solution does not lie in ungrounded decisions defended by historical general statements.

The fact that the Westminster Standards are a Confession based on the principles of the Reformation does not guarantee complete scriptural truth. The Reformed Churches have adopted the Three Forms of Unity because they accurately summarize the Word of God. When other reformed confessions have different formulations we are correctly suspicious. Heresies have poisoned the Church in far more subtle ways throughout history.

Those who quote statements by Synods and church leaders expressing that the Westminster Standards are reformed conveniently overlook others who have expressed warnings.

The consistory of Rotterdam was confronted with this matter back in 1952 when two brothers in Tasmania from Holland asked advice about joining a Presbyterian/Reformed coalition. They were answered, “The consistory therefore concludes that church institution, on grounds of the Westminster Confession, by a right-minded Reformed person is not possible... (they) read our confession, so to speak, with Westminster glasses. ...In no time you will have the synodical yoke under which not only you but also the coming generations will have to bow their neck. Not to say anything of the covenant view of the Westminster Confession.” This letter is signed by Rev. D. K. Wielenga, chairman and an elder C. Van Spronsen, clerk.

They do not call the Westminster Standards unreformed, but they do warn against unity. Let us remember that we have Three Forms of Unity, not four. We pray that premature “unity” does not lead to division. Let unity depend on truth and not truth on unity! PdB

A RESPONSE

In our last issue Rev. J. van Popta took issue with some of the comments he found in Vol. 1, No.9. In particular, he suggested that the undersigned had insinuated that the Westminster Standards do not support, or even speak against infant baptism.

When we published his letter we promised a response. We want to begin by thanking Rev. van Popta for taking the time and interest to address his concern by writing. It is preferable to polemicize in this way, rather than having to address comments that might be made in other publications.

Rev. van Popta seems to take issue with the paragraph that reads:

“Those who would relegate this doctrinal issue (that of infant baptism) to that of the non-essential must remember that years ago many struggles have been fought about this doctrine. The matter of the place of infants in the covenant was also very important during the Liberation in the Netherlands. It threatens to become an issue again now that the Church has accepted the Westminster Standards as a truly Reformed Confession.”

From this paragraph he concludes that the Westminster Standards are being accused of not teaching infant baptism, or could lead to such conclusions. He admits that this is not said in so many words, but detected a strong insinuation.

He continued his letter by defending the Westminster Standards in pointing to the Larger and Shorter Catechism where it is taught that “children of believers who are members of the church and of the covenant (!) are to be baptized.” Thereafter he uses the balance of his letter to promote the Westminster Standards as a Reformed confession and expounds on the historicity of his position. We admit that the Larger and Shorter Catechism teach about infant baptism, but we do not wish to neglect what the Westminster Confession states about the place of infants in the covenant and what that means. In chapter 10, section 3 the Westminster Confession states, “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.”

In his explanation of the Westminster Confession, G. I. Williamson writes: “Christ said that little children and even tiny infants are, as such members of the kingdom (Luke 18:15, 16 and parallel passages). And David seems to express the view that infants dying in infancy may be saved (II Sam. 12:23). But beyond these few statements, and good and necessary inferences which may be drawn from Scripture, there is strict limitation placed upon what we may legitimately say in this matter. It is important to note, therefore, that the original formulation of the Westminster Confession does carefully observe this limitation. It only says “elect infants, dying in infancy,” without attempting to speculate as to how many or few there may be of such persons. And the same is true of “all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word. ... We rejoice in this and gladly assert that it is only on the basis of pure Reformed doctrine that there is a basis of hope for infants dying in infancy and others of like incapacity. But we regard it as perverse when this hope is made a sweeping claim. ... We can assert that there are elect infants who die in infancy. We can also assert that believers have special warrant to hope that their infants who die in infancy are such. But beyond this we may not go. We may legitimately hope, but we may not demand.”

In this part of the Westminster Confession we are confronted by what is also taught in Question and Answer 31 of the Larger Catechism. This answer confesses that the covenant of grace was made with Christ and in Him with the elect. When Synod Sneek - Utrecht 1942 of the “Gereformeerde Kerken” placed pastors and elders under the obligation to exclusively teach the related doctrine of a presumptive regeneration of the children of the covenant, we refused to do so because we believed that this doctrine was in conflict with the Scriptural teaching of the establishment of the covenant of grace by the LORD with the believers and with their seed, Gen. 17:7, Acts 2:39

Why are we so eager to minimize this difference after the Lord has shown us how important it is by liberating His Church from it only fifty years ago? Does this make all Presbyterians reprobate and all presbyterian churches false? No! But at the same time we need to be vigilant in establishing complete union with them. They have not gone through the Liberation and have not been shown all of the riches God gave to His church in the Netherlands. Therefore we must discuss and debate these matters. And they will also be able to teach us what they have learned in their history. But

because we can not come to immediate agreement does not mean that we should minimize and ignore the differences. Rather we should continue to help each other in discussion about them. If in the end (and much wisdom will be needed to determine that time - may God provide insight) the truth of scripture is denied in favour of the wisdom of men, then it must sadly be recognized that such a church is false.

In these matters it is of great concern how the Reformed seem ready to compromise the truth for the sake of unity. Let us not pretend to be one in all things when we are not. PdB

1) Rev.J.van Popta in Reformed Polemics, Vol 1, No.9

OLD CONFESSIONS FOR MODERN TIMES

by: Rev.C. Bouwman

In most of our churches, the occasion annually presents itself for the Form for Public Profession of Faith to be read. This opportunity allows us to be reminded of the vows we ourselves voiced before God and His Church so many years ago when we professed our faith.

One of the questions to which we voiced our "I Do" was this;

"First, do you whole heartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church? Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?"

This particular question as it's printed above asks for our thoughts concerning whatever God had revealed in Holy Scripture. When this question was asked of us, the Church wanted to hear from our mouths whether we did or did not believe all that God had said, be it about creation, providence, depravity, redemption, forgiveness, resurrection, etc. Unless we embraced all God's revelation, and promised to continue in this doctrine come what may, we could not profess the faith.

Over the centuries of church history, the faith God revealed in Scripture (and professed, through His grace, by ourselves) has been summarized in confessions. In this first question of the Form for Public Profession of Faith, the confessions referred to are particularly the three Forms of Unity (i.e., Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and therefore also the three Ecumenical Creeds (ie, the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed); these six creeds together are the official confessions of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. Since these six creeds "summarize" what the Lord has taught us in Scripture, any commitment (as required in the first question of the Form for Public Profession of Faith) stating allegiance to the teachings of Scriptures is necessarily also a commitment to the summaries of these doctrines as laid out in our six creeds.

That reality, however, raises for us a question. We live in the last decade of the twentieth century, and in this modern society need to be children of the God rejected by society. The confessions to which our commitment is required, however, are all centuries old. More, any one who reads those confessions senses straightaway that these confessions breathe the air of centuries ago; they interact with questions of days gone by, and not specifically with circumstances of our time. Hence the question: of what relevance are these confessions to us today? Is it really necessary that we and our

youth adhere today to those products of human hands made in circumstances so vastly different from our modern times? More, is it actually correct for us today, in the questions of daily life and in the discussions we have, to fall back on the creeds of long ago?

Central to our minds is to be the conviction that the confessions of the church summarize the Word of God, and therefore have authority and relevance so many years after they were written.

The reader will understand that the question formulated above has come into focus specifically because of the discussions on the doctrine of the church. Then the question becomes this: are the circumstances of today - with untold numbers of churches in a given community (who all need each other in our secularized world too yet) - not radically different from the circumstances in which the Belgic Confession was written? Indeed, are the concrete questions and problems of today not so extremely different that the pronouncements of the Confessions about the church are simply unworkable in our modern times? Does any appeal to what the Belgic Confession says on the doctrine of the Church not result in answers too simplistic for the complicated situation of today?

I'd like to broaden the question to refer to more than the doctrine of the church. In our scientific age, we have learned to think very much in terms of cause and effect; for every action happening in the world around us, there must necessarily be an explainable cause. The accident happened because the brakes failed. I stubbed my toe because I didn't see the brick on the path. In this system of things, though, there is no room left for the presence and action of angels in our lives. Yet according to the Confessions we've inherited from centuries past, angels are very much part of daily life (c.f. Art 12 of the Belgic Confession). Must we conclude that the formulations of the Confessions about the events happening to us are out-dated for our modern times? And that therefore we ought to relax our allegiance to these Confessions somewhat? And get back simply to the basics of Scripture?

In answer to these questions, it needs to be fixed in our minds first of all what a confession is. Various passages of Scripture speak about "confessing". The Pharisees of Acts 23, for example "confess" the reality of resurrection and angels (vs. 8). No person shall be saved, Paul writes, unless "you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 10:9). And John reminds us that "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God" (I John 4:2). The word translated in all these quotes by "confess" comes from the Greek word meaning literally: "to say the same thing".

The point here is that people sought to repeat in their own words what they understood God to say in His Word. More, by repeating after God (be it in own words), people gave expression to their conviction that what God told them (about the resurrection or about the Lord Jesus) is true indeed. This, then, is what a confession is: a confession is a human attempt to echo in words what we have heard God say to us in Holy Writ. The Form for Public Profession of Faith captures (an aspect of) this concept when it states that a confession "summarizes" God's revelation in the Bible.

A couple of comments follow from this understanding of what a confession is. In the first place, it needs to be understood that every confession is a human effort. It is true that the "confession" mentioned in the Bible are inspired by God and therefore without flaw (c.f. Dt.25:56ff; Rom.1:3f; I Tim.3:16; etc). But once the canon of Scripture was closed, all confessions drawn up by men need

invariably to be open to correction; no confession can perfectly echo what the Lord has said in His Word. In fact, the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century spawned a few dozen confessions, including about ten Lutheran creeds, seven Zwinglian, and twenty-five Reformed (to say nothing of Anabaptist and Roman Catholic confessions). Amongst all these creeds, the one is far more successful than the next in summarizing accurately what the Lord has said in His Word, but none does so flawlessly; for that human depravity remains too great. We do admit in the Belgic Confession that “we may not consider any writings of man, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the divine Scriptures” (Art. 7).

Nevertheless, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia have taken three of these Reformational Creeds (The Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort), and said of these three that they - as far as we can judge - echo accurately what God has revealed in Scripture. Though human products, these three Reformational Creeds are found to be proper summations of that which God has said to us.

In the second place, it needs to be borne in mind that every confession is made in a particular context. One need but give the Heidelberg Catechism or the Belgic Confession a cursory reading to be convinced that these confessions breathe the air of their times. The reference in LF 30 to the mass being an “accursed idolatry”, for example, recalls the heated pronouncements of the Council of Trent. To understand a confession, then, one must, as much as possible, understand also the circumstances in which the confession was written.

In fact, it’s precisely the air which these confessions exude that gives them their lively flavour.

These confessions are the testimony of very real people who lived in very real every-day circumstances. These were people like we ourselves, struggling to do the will of God in the traumas of their lives. In their particular circumstances they expressed the faith God had given in Scripture. So it is that the formulations of specific doctrines have been determined not just by words from the Bible, but also by the struggles facing the authors in their daily lives.

Do these two realities, now, somehow diminish the value of these confessions for us today? Does the fact that they are man-made, and does the fact that they breathe the air of ancient times, imply that we ought not today to ask our youth to agree that they accurately summarize what the Lord has revealed in Holy Scripture? On both counts the answer is no.

Certainly, confessions are man-made and therefore are not without error. And certainly too, confessions originate from circumstances radically different from our situation today. Neither of these realities may ever be forgotten. Those two realities, however, take away nothing from the value these confessions of old have for us today. For these confessions say the same thing (be it in human words and a particular context) as God has said in His Word. Since that Word has relevance for every person in any situation, and accurate summary of that Word also has relevance for every person in every situation. One cannot maintain that LD 30 (concerning the Lord’s Supper in contrast to the Romish mass) was Scripturally accurate (and hence relevant) four hundred years ago, but is not relevant today. If LD 30 echoed accurately four hundred years ago what God taught His people, then this Lord’s Day is relevant always. God’s Word, after all, does not change, and so anything God said is relevant for any point in time. And as to the formulations of LD 30, yes, they were determined in response to the specific circumstances of the time and so show the way in

which the fathers worked with the one true faith in the circumstances of their day. Even so, the content captured in these formulations remains true today; one cannot maintain that this echo of God's Word to us is not relevant for us today.

It is for us, then, to bear in mind more than the fact that the confessions are human documents crafted in times gone by. Central to our minds is to be the conviction that the confessions of the Church summarize the Word of God and therefore also appreciate dearly the summaries of that Word as we have inherited them over the years.