

## Union Membership in Two Reformed Churches: An Historical Study

By: J. L. van Popta Hamilton, 1992

[Unpublished Ethics paper for Dr. N. H. Gootjes]

### Introduction

The compatibility of Union membership and Reformed Church membership has been an issue for many years in North America. The Christian Reformed Church Synods<sup>1</sup> had this issue placed on their agenda as early as 1881.<sup>2</sup> Since the Christian Reformed Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches share a common heritage, Christian Reformed synodical decisions on unionism are of great interest to us. This paper will explore the development of the decisions from the early years to 1950's and compare this to the position of the Canadian Reformed Church at New Westminster in 1951 and the further discussion of that decision by J.T. van Popta in 1952.

The position taken in the first years of the Canadian Reformed Churches is one of anti-thetical opposition to all unions and unionism. The position of the Christian Reformed Church, on the other hand, had not been consistent. In the early years CRC Synods considered unions in light of lodge membership. In the mid-twentieth century unions were simply considered to be an economic reality. It is worth noting that in the Christian Reformed decisions and reports there is an almost total lack of mention of Marxism or Marxist revolutionary theory. There is also no consideration of the influence the "Social Gospel" movement which was completely intertwined with the rise of the labour union movement in North America.

The Canadian Reformed position rejected the possibility of membership in "so-called" neutral unions, whereas the Christian Reformed Synods consistently admitted the possibility that a Church member be a member of a union without incurring guilt or committing a censurable sin.

Before we will be able to compare the stand taken by the Christian Reformed Church to that of New Westminster and Rev J. T. van Popta we will first need to give an historical survey of the Christian Reformed

---

<sup>1</sup> CRC Synods met yearly from 1869 - 1884; biennially [on even years] from 1884 - 1936; annually from 1837 - today. There were 4 "General Assemblies" [only one classis] prior to this [1865-1868].

<sup>2</sup> It reappeared in '83, '86, '90, '92, '00, '02, '04, '06, '08, '12, '14, '16, '26, '28, '30, '34, '36, and every Synod from 1939 - 1963. From 1883 to the 1960's this question came to 2/3 of the CRC Synods [49 of 69]. See Appendix A.

Synodical decisions.<sup>3</sup> Then we will examine a short statement by E.C. Baartman [EB 51], the decision of New Westminster 1951 [NW 51] and van Popta 1952 [VP 52]. These three statements are the earliest statements on unions in the Canadian Reformed Church history. Any discussion today should come to grips with the decisions of the CRC and the statements made in the C/ARC of the 1950's, as well as developing an understanding of the historical context in which they were made.

### **Christian Reformed Synodical Decisions - 1881-1928.**

A summary of CRC decisions found in AG I 1943:5-12 cover the years prior to 1940. This summary will suffice to lay out the position from 1881-1928.<sup>4</sup>

#### **1881**

Synod judged that unions are "usually un-Christian and that the congregations should therefore be warned against them [PC:217]." The judgment is clear and concise.

#### **1883**

Classis Hudson, in seeking advice in this matter informed the Synod that it considered "membership in such organizations to be contrary to the Word of God, the Christian conscience, and the well-being of the Church (AG I 1943:5)." Synod judges that it cannot lay down general rules and advises that the Churches "to guard against such matters as are clearly in conflict with the Word of God and the rules of the Church (AG I 1943:5)." No Biblical, confessional nor Church Order arguments are given (in this summary).

#### **1886**

Synod decided that membership in the organization "Knights of Labor" and all other organizations bound with an oath or solemn pledge was incompatible with membership in the Church. Schaver informs us that this decision included the "Patrons of Industry," and "Farmers' Alliances." This decision was based on the judgment that these "have started out in the way of force which is in conflict with the fifth commandment and that patient

---

<sup>3</sup> I have been able to identify approx. 90 entries in the Acts and Agendas of CRC General Synods from 1881-1959 that concern unions, unionism, labour, labour policy, and the Christian Labor Assoc. See Appendix A. All references to the Acts will follow the format "year:pg#" (eg. 1924:100). All references to the Agendas (some are in 2 volumes), "AG year:pg#" (eg. AG I 1943:20).

<sup>4</sup> This discussion will be supplemented by material from J.L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*. Vol. 2, 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1956. [PC:pg#] (and any other primary documentation that was available to me.)

trust which the believer confesses to have in his God [PC 218].” Those who are in such organizations are to be dealt with considerably but the holiness of the sacraments is to be maintained (AG I 1943:6).

This decision places union membership within the context of the fifth commandment. It also alludes to the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27. Union membership, by this decision, is judged to be revolutionary and shows lack of trust in God.

## **1888**

The decision of 1886 is maintained.

## **1892**

This Synod decided that 1) each union be judged on the basis of its statutes and purpose; 2) if a union be judged to be against the Word of God then membership in said union would necessarily lead to Church discipline. This judgment is maintained consistently by consecutive Synods.

## **1900/1902**

No decisions were made but reports were received and sent out to the Churches for diligent study.

## **1904**

The decision of 1904 seems to be the first with any extensive exegetical or confessional basis in back of it.<sup>5</sup> This Synod set out seven characteristic features of unions “not neutral.”<sup>6</sup> This decision<sup>7</sup> clearly makes union membership an ethical matter. In the judgment of Synod, many unions would cause their members to live contrary to the first and the fifth commandment by “exact[ing] an oath or promise of unconditional obedience to the majority or the board with disregard of one’s duty toward God, the State, the Church, and the family [PC 219].” This is also in conflict with 1 Cor 7:23 and Gal 5:1.

Membership in unions, which officially desecrate the Lord’s Day by holding general or board meetings or organize excursions on Sunday, is also not permissible for Christians (4th commandment). Neither may Christians be members of unions that condone picket line violence or any strikes or boycotts that would be in conflict with the 5th or 6th commandment [PC 219].

---

<sup>5</sup> I am unable to confirm this, working from the summaries in AG I 1943 and PC.

<sup>6</sup> I have not been able to find a clear definition of “neutral” or “not neutral” in the material at hand.

<sup>7</sup> This decision can be found in translation in AG I 1943:7f.

If the union would forbid Christians from doing what is commanded by the Word of God, or command or necessitate a Christian to do that which is forbidden, then this would also preclude any possibility for membership [PC 219].

The same would hold for any union that raises money in a manner contrary to the Word of God (dancing; card parties; etc.) [PC 219]. This is the first direct decision that incorporates the idea of "corporate responsibility." This weighed heavily in the years that followed and became as source of contention and caused disagreement and controversy for it was not clear for many years if "corporate responsibility" would cause occasion for discipline leading to excommunication or not. The inability to come to terms with this problem perhaps is the single factor in the failure of the CRC Synods to give consistent leadership in this issue.

Christians also can not be members of a union that have secret rituals (religious ceremonies) or if it is an oath-bound organization (1st and 3rd commandments). Here the CRC rejected unions that had any semblance to Lodges. The Reformed Church of America (RCA) had tolerated Masonic Lodge membership. In 1880 many members and whole congregations broke with the RCA and joined the CRC, which had taken a stand against Lodge membership. This must have played an important factor in the decisions against unions for it is clear that there is a link, at least in structure and ideals, between the Lodges and the Unions. The decision of 1886 against membership in the "Knights of Labor" illustrates that.<sup>8</sup>

This decision sets union membership in conflict with the 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th commandments. Noticeably missing are the 8th and 10th commandments.<sup>9</sup> The interpretation of these commandments is obviously in light of the Heidelberg Catechism though these are not expressly stated in the decision.

The 1904 Synod also reiterated the decisions of previous Synods by declaring that membership in unions, which showed these characteristics, could not be tolerated. The consistories were to proceed cautiously and in an informed way, yet censure was allowed if necessary. The consistories were also directed to urge members to remain outside of neutral or tolerable unions or break with them if possible; or better yet, to form a Christian

---

<sup>8</sup> The CRC has consistently denied the possibility for Church members to join any Lodge. 1857-1880, 1886, 1890, 1900, 1908, 1957, 1958, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1977 1978, 1979, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> It is not clear why these commandments were not called on. Perhaps the social situation which brought about the rise of unions in North America did not obviously present the problems of theft, greed and covetousness to theologians of the day. In our own context these commandments would play a much more significant role.

organization. The Synod appointed a committee to investigate this last option; the formation of Christian Labor organizations [AG I 1943:8].

### **1906/1908/1914**

The committee reported in 1906 but requested more time to wrestle with the issues [AG I 1943:8]. It again reported in 1908 but Synod simply filed the report and made no new decision nor repealed any previous decisions [AG I 1943:8]. In 1914 it became apparent that there was no unanimity in the committee. The committee presented a minority and majority report. The majority report was short and simply re-iterated that the Synod should stay the course, whereas the minority report suggested that perhaps the previous Synods had overstepped their bounds in this matter. This report [1914:121-130] doubted that a Synod should express itself on these matters and that perhaps the previous decisions should be revoked [1914:129f].<sup>10</sup>

Synod decided to follow the recommendation of its own committee as follows: *dat deze Synode zich niet definitief uitspreke, maar eene Comm. aanstelle om de volgende Synode met een welomshcreven advies te dienen* [1914:14].<sup>11</sup>

### **1916**

The new committee recommended that the ambiguity inherent in the term “tolerable” should be removed, because defining the present standing of some members in the Church as “tolerable” is undesirable [AG I 1943:9]. It also recommended that the Synod decide that “there are insufficient data to show that membership of the Church is inconsistent with membership in so-called neutral unions, unless it can be proved that a union according to its constitution leads into sin or sins, or in in [sic] its continuous actions shows that it favors sins, because as long as there is no certainty in the matter it is not possible to maintain the position taken....[AG I 1943:9].” This argument had as grounds the inability of the previous committee to find unanimity. The Synod agreed.

The committee also recommended and Synod decided the following:

- a. If one is compelled to belong to a so-called neutral union, in order to provide for oneself, then one should always, in one’s union and in the minds of one’s co-laborers, witness strongly

---

<sup>10</sup> We see here that the stamina of the Church on the issue of union membership is beginning to fail. This is a crack that will not be repaired.

<sup>11</sup> “...that this Synod not speak out definitely, but appoint a committee that will serve the next Synod with a comprehensive report.” This seems to be an attempt to escape the force of previous decisions.

that one belongs to Jesus Christ and desires to seek His honor; and if one is hindered in this one should break with such a union.

b. In places where independent Christian organizations are desirable, there should be an attempt to cooperate as much as possible with other unions, in order to obtain or retain right and justice. [AG I 1943:9]

Monsma and Van Dellen [MvD]<sup>12</sup> correctly call this a compromise position [MvD 297]. The decision only addresses the so-called neutral unions but opens the door to union membership generally. The grounds for separation from unions becomes simply the inability for Christian testimony. The sense of corporate responsibility is lost altogether. There is also the implicit recognition of the legitimacy of “other unions” in the unqualified permission to cooperate with them. It should be noted that there are no scriptural or confessional nor ethical arguments put forward. This decision caused the fledgling Christian Labor Organization based in Grand Rapids to fold. These decisions were unsatisfactory for many Church members and the issue continued to come to the attention of Synods.

## **1924/1926/1928**

The 1924 Synod was overtured by the consistory of Zillah to return to 1916 [AG 1924: xxxvi]. Instead it struck a new committee to study the problem [1924:101]. It recognized that perhaps the decisions of 1916 had a provisional character [1924:101] and so could be changed. There was an extensive report drafted. It first surveyed the history of the issue [AG 1926:89-114]. This was followed by an exegetical study of 2 Cor 6:14, 1 Cor 5:9-11, and 2 Cor 6:17 [AG 1926:115-118]. This part of the report was structured around three questions. (They are found translated in AG I 1943:10f.) The report ends with its recommendations [AG 1924:118-124]. (See further below - 1928.)

This new report was not made available early enough for the Churches to deal with it and so was only received for information [1926:61] and sent to committee for reconsideration in 1928. This was judged to be a matter that touched practical life [1926:61] in such a way that quick and rash judgments should not be made.

---

<sup>12</sup> van Dellen, I., M. Monsma. *The Church Order Commentary: Being a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941.

This report, however, was adopted with little change in 1928. This Synod decided that Christians were free to co-operate with their neighbours in all lawful social enterprises and unite with them in any organization as long as it was not in conflict with the Word of God [1928:91]. Synod also decided that there was a strong moment of corporate responsibility involved in membership of any social organization. Any Christian would be duty bound to protest vigorously decisions or practices that violated justice. A Christian would be implicated by consent or silence. If the organization would not change, withdrawal would be the only possibility. Synod also judged that the Church is empowered by Christ to purify herself from those who have joined ungodly organizations. The Consistories and ministers were also to instruct those who were members of organizations not in conflict with the Word of God but with Christian principles. If there was much found which is worthy of disapproval, Church discipline was to be exercised, though excommunication was only to be applied to those who were personally guilty of censurable sin [1928: 91ff].

There is in these decisions a move back to the earlier position; the position which was maintained prior to 1916. It did not, however, state this position as clearly as the 1904 decision.

When the committee and the Synod decided to draft their report as a response to three questions they already coloured their response. Union membership was now approached by asking: Does being a member of a social organization that does not positively adopt Christian principles, bring a church member in conflict with Christian principles? In 1904 the question was: Does union membership bring Christians in conflict with the Word of God and the 10 commandments? This should have remained the question. If 1904 had made wrong decisions and answered incorrectly then 1928 should have judged that 1904 was wrong. It did not help to ask a new question in order to get out from under the weight of the old answer.

1928 also changed the understanding of corporate responsibility. In 1904 members of unions were guilty of union practices. In 1928 members were absolved of guilt if they protested. This is stronger than 1916, which said that Christians were absolved of guilt because of their Christian witness. These new statements are ambiguous and have no standard by which to judge them. Even 1928 leaves the door open for union membership in ungodly unions as long as the member protests. The Synod allowed, however, that Consistories had the power of discipline, to censure, and excommunicate all those who refuse to break with ungodly organizations. This was, however, qualified by further defining corporate responsibility.

If the purpose of a society is in itself lawful and the organization in its constitution does not require anything of its members that is contrary to justice, the Church cannot take disciplinary action against anyone simply because of membership in such an organization.... Here therefore the rule also applies that only the fact that one is personally guilty of a censurable sin makes one an object of ecclesiastical discipline. [AG I 1943:17]

The Consistories were instructed to examine the constitution of every organization to which members belonged to determine if membership implied corporate guilt and if discipline would need to begin. We see then that the Synod gave with one hand and took with the other. In attempting to find a *via media* it created an impossible situation.

This Synod also decided to strike a committee that would examine how the Church could resuscitate Christian labour organizations. This committee was to report to the 1930 Synod. 1928 also struck a committee to examine whether the AFL was neutral.

### **Christian Reformed Synodical Decisions - 1930-1951**

At this point in the development of the CRC response to unions and unionism there is a clear change in direction and focus. A certain Br. Gritter enters the scene in 1932 [1932:101]. He is CEO of the now newly founded Christian Labor Association. He begins to petition the Synods for financial support for his fledgling organization, which consecutive Synods grant. Yet, the Synods make decisions that counter the direction that this man is attempting to lead the labour movement in the CRC.

Our examination will begin with the report that was brought to the 1930 Synod and how Gritter by 1940 is protesting the direction of the Churches. His protests were the catalyst that caused the Synods to once again review the positions taken in 1904, 1916 and 1926. This review was presented as a report to the 1943 Synod.

#### **1930**

The "Report of the Committee on Christian Social and Industrial Organizations" [AG II 1930:231-235] considered its mandate to be to find the answer to this question: What can the Church do for the resuscitation of distinctly Christian social and industrial organizations [AG II 1930:232]?

This report rejects the possibility that the Church has a mandate here. The Church is not to establish social organizations for members. It may only address the compatibility of Church members to social organizations and the

Church must address this issue. It may only do so however, by the preaching of the Word. Members must be taught that they are to remain separate from the world. The ministers must show that "Marxian-Socialism with its glorification of class hatred, class struggle, and class ethics, and its principle that might makes right" is unequivocally anti-Christian.<sup>13</sup> It also called "attention to the principle of corporate responsibility, clearly taught in the Word of God (Acts 2:23, 36; 3:13-15; 2 Cor 6:14-17; Eph 5:11; I Tim 5:22; 2 John 11; Rev 18:4), affirmed by an enlightened Christian conscience, and recognized by sociologists [AG II 1930:235]."

There is also the need for firm and loving Church discipline for all those who **"refuse to break with organizations that are avowedly anti-Christian in character, or reveal throughout an anti-Christian spirit in their activities [AG II 1930:235; emphasis added]."**

These last clauses caused much confusion and allowed for a very open ended interpretation. This was done by many. Gritter picked up on this and overtured the 1939 Synod which referred the whole thing back to committee which reported to the 1940 Synod.

## 1937

The Synod declared, "that political, social, and economical questions are ecclesiastical matters only when doctrinal and ethical issues of sufficient moment and magnitude are involved according to the Word of God and our Standards [1937:11]." That the Synods continue to address the issue of Union membership shows that there was a general consensus that this was an ethical matter. It is not clear, however, why the Synods so seldom called on the Word of God or the Standards in order to answer the difficult ethical issues involved.

## 1940

Gritter "request[ed] that Synod reconsider some of the decisions of former Synods regarding so-called neutral Labor Unions [1940:334]." Gritter calling on the decisions of 1904 as his authority, argued that The American Federation of Labor [AFL] and the Conference of Industrial Organizations [CIO] both stand condemned by the criteria of characteristics of labour unions not neutral (see above). Gritter pointed out that even by the weakened statement of 1916 these organizations would be outside of what

---

<sup>13</sup> This is the first recognition of the Marxist influence in the North American labour movement. Reading the writings of the Social Gospel theologians (1880-1940) the revolutionary spirit of Marx and Engels is seen to permeate their writings. This is especially true of the American, W. Rauschenbusch and the Canadian, Salem Bland.

was tolerable. The decisions of 1928, however, are so ambiguous that these decisions are no longer enforceable by consistories [1940:337]. At first the decision of 1930 seemed to repair the breach of 1928 but on close examination, if the criteria of 1930 are applied, membership in virtually every organization would be allowed. The statement: There is also the need for firm and loving Church discipline for all those who **“refuse to break with organizations that are avowedly anti-Christian in character, or reveal throughout an anti-Christian spirit in their activities [AG II 1930:235; emphasis added]”** can be interpreted so freely that nothing is banned. There are few if any organizations that are “avowedly anti-Christian” or are permeated with an “anti-Christian spirit.” Some one could argue that unless these two characteristics manifest themselves there is no corporate responsibility. Gritter wanted the Synod to address this issue [1940:338].

The committee responded by agreeing with Gritter that decisions to that point had been confusing and that there was a need to revise previous decisions with respect to Labor Unions [1940:341]. Gritter also wanted the Synod to pass judgment on the AFL and CIO. This too was to be sent to committee. When the committee reported to the Synod 1942 it was too late for the Churches to have reviewed the material so it was delayed to 1943 [1942:132]. This report was placed in AG I 1943:3-25.

1930 refused to judge whether the AFL was neutral for it could not be sure whether it could remain free of radical socialism and communism [1930:74]. The new committee agreed, in concert with Bouman (*De Kerkelijke Tucht* p. 166), S. Greijdanus (*Reformatie*: April 14, 1939), Jansen (*De Kerkelijke Tucht*, p. 170f) and Van Dellen and Monsma, (*Church Order Commentary*, p.296), and Grosheide’s report to the 1939-43 Synod that it is not the Synod’s duty to apply “censure” to secular organizations but that it is the duty of Consistories to guide, teach, and discipline the members of the local Churches [AG I 1943:19f]. On the whole this report fails to address the issues involved.

The Synod adopted the recommendations of the committee to “reassert re Labor Unions the position taken in 1916 and 1928 and the conclusions of the report, ‘Christian Social and Industrial Organizations,’ as adopted by the Synod of 1930.” The position of 1904 was now officially abandoned. There were overtures presented to Synod that asked Synod not to accept this report for its contradictory statements concerning corporate responsibility. This overture was substantially the same as Gritter’s protest in 1929. Synod decided to strike a committee on “Corporate Responsibility.” The mandate did not include a report deadline [1940:105]. The CRC no longer was

addressing the issue of whether union affiliation was compatible with Church membership. This had been conceded when 1904 was abandoned. The question now was: "In how far do the actions of a union implicate the members?"

## 1944

D. Dykstra's [of Grand Rapids] protest that the decision of 1943 abandons the historic position of the CRC *vis-à-vis* union membership is rejected [1944:62]. Synod gives as grounds that "all membership in neutral labor unions is not necessarily incompatible with membership in our Churches." The committee on "corporate responsibility" did not report.

## 1945

The report of the committee on corporate responsibility is the most exegetical and far reaching of all the reports since 1904 and perhaps even surpassing that.<sup>14</sup> This report grants that 1904 was correct. "Without necessarily endorsing all the details of that decision, it must be maintained that in principle that position of that Synod was correct and Scriptural [AG 1945:35f]."

This report was accepted by Synod along with all five recommendations [AG 1945:36f]. These are summarized as follows: 1) Active participation in sinful practices renders one guilty before God and may lead to Church discipline. 2) One is also responsible for wrongdoing if by aiding and abetting or by consent or approval one should give support to unrighteous acts. 3) Passiveness or silence is sufficient to incur guilt. Failure to protest vigorously makes one accountable before God. 4) Remaining a member of an organization which refuses to amend its ways after reproof involves co-responsibility. 5) Even joining an organization whose aims or practices are known to be evil incurs guilt. "There is only one safe solution...; namely the establishment and promotion of definitely Christian organizations in the social sphere [AG 1945:37]."

In this decision there is a complete turn, back to the fundamental position which was held in the early decisions, especially 1904. It is noteworthy that under 1) the report expresses agreement with 1943, 1930, and 1928; under 3) and 4) there is agreement with 1928; and under 5) the committee is in agreement with 1904. As the definition of corporate responsibility broadens, the report finds that it is in agreement further and further back. At its broadest point it reaches the earliest decision. The only

---

<sup>14</sup> In this report is exegesis on Rev 2:20; Rom 1:32; Acts 8:1; 22:20; Acts 3:13,14; I Tim 5:22; 2 John 10,11; Eph 5:11; 2 Cor 6:14-18; Rev 18:4.

conclusion can be that between 1904 and 1940 there was a weaker and weaker sense of corporate responsibility and that more and more union membership was tolerated. It was only when a more comprehensive exegetical study was done that a committee had to agree with their fathers that secular union membership [i.e. unions not neutral] and Church membership were fundamentally incompatible.

## 1946

This was not the end of the matter. There was another committee that had received its mandate from the 1945 Synod. There had been protests to the decisions of 1943 concerning union membership by Mr. Dykstra. The Synod appointed a committee (made up of all the members of the committee on corporate responsibility -- with others) to formulate grounds for showing compatibility between Church membership and membership in "so-called" neutral unions [1945:87]. This committee's report can be found in 1946:265-267. In it they reiterate the possibility that there may be unions and organizations that are not anti-Christian but are law abiding social institutions. It is possible for Church members to be and remain members of such organizations. This report said that Reformed Christians must not espouse Anabaptist separatist tendencies.

## 1947

Two brothers, in a concrete case, ask Synod to apply the criteria of 1945 to the AFL and CIO and judge that membership in them incompatible with Church membership. Synod declines to do so [1947:89]. In the light of the manner that the Synods have handled unionism thus far, this is high incomprehensible.

## 1950

It seems that in a building expansion of Calvin Seminary, contracts were let out to "closed shop" AFL-CIO contractors. This meant that many Church members who would not join the AFL-CIO were effectively shut out of Church building projects because of a principle position [AG 1950:215]. There was an overture that Synod instruct the college board to change its policy. This was done - carefully.

## 1952

Once again the Calvin board let out a contract to a "closed-shop" contractor. This elicited a storm of protest. Synod sends the problem to committee. At stake here is the refusal of the Synods to judge AFL- CIO union membership as incompatible with Church membership. This of course

meant that the Calvin board need not question whether it could bring in an AFL-CIO affiliated contractor to do its expansion work. Other CRC members could not, by reason of conscience, join the AFL-CIO and were members of the CLA instead and so were shut out of the job site.

## 1953

The problem of denominational construction projects expanded. The committee could not agree [1953: 121ff]. Neither could the Synod committee [1953:122]. Neither could the Synod [1953:125-128]. The minority report recommended that Synod mind its own business. The majority report recommended that Synod judge the AFL-CIO as anti-Christian. Synod sends the problem to committee with the mandate to poll the Churches.

## 1954-1957

The issue dies in a fizzle of non-committal responses to appeals and overtures with consecutive Synods refusing to use previous decisions effectively. The only decision that was consistently used was the one which said that "Church membership and membership in a so-called neutral labor union are compatible as long as such union gives no constitutional warrant to sins, nor shows in its regular activities that it champions sin." [1916:38; 1942:102; 1946:103f]. This is cited in 1957:108. This decision seems to be the last one made on this issue in the CRC; at least it is the last one for decades.<sup>15</sup>

## Overview 1881-1957

The CRC Synods wrestled with the issue but were unable to consistently apply the decisions in concrete cases. They had in 1904 and in 1945 extensive exegetical work and study at hand. The Church perhaps found it impossible to effectively work with the decisions because a lack of stamina in calling its members out of the "so-called neutral unions." It seems that so many were members that the Synods were unable to apply the decisions of 1904 and 1945 without alienating a large portion of the Church membership [1954:553-556]. In the end the final decision rested on the non-condemnation of unions in general. It seems apparent that the decisions of 1904 and 1945 are simply ignored and that unionism is likely generally accepted in the CRC today.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> The index used ends in 1980.

<sup>16</sup> This could be borne out in the concrete situations in which Canadian Reformed Church members who are under censure for union membership withdraw from the supervision of the local consistory and join the CRC instead.

## Canadian Reformed Position

The first decision on unions and unionism in the Canadian Reformed Churches was in 1951(?) by the consistory of New Westminster [NW51]. This decision was published in Dutch in the 1952 yearbook of the Canadian Reformed Churches in an article on unions by J.T. Van Popta.<sup>17</sup> In a preamble to this article E.C. Baartman<sup>18</sup> makes 7 statements. 1) Unions are revolutionary and humanistic. 2) They are anti-God. 3) They espouse violence and show disdain for authority. 4) Members are bound by oath to put the cause of the union ahead of all else. 5) Corporate responsibility incurs guilt, as does organizational solidarity. 6) The unions desire control of all economic life just as the antichrist of Rev 13. 7) These unions are actually a religious entity.

This brief statement has a different tone than the CRC decisions that were being made at the same time. There seems to be no continuity between the CRC and Baartman at all. Baartman had emigrated in 1947 and was a member of the CRC until the institution of a *Liberated* house congregation in New Westminster in 1950.<sup>19</sup> He could have been familiar with the CRC decisions on unions and chose not to use them except perhaps for his statement on corporate responsibility.

When the newly instituted Canadian Reformed Church of New Westminster needed to address unions and union membership it too did not draw on the CRC decisions that were available. Two objections are given. The first objection to membership was to the requirement of unconditional obedience (adherence) to the laws and bylaws in force or yet to be enacted. The consistory on the basis of Belgic Confession Article 7, shows that this type of obedience is reserved only for the Word of God. Believers are to "test the spirits, whether they are from God."

The second objection was against "closed-shop" policies of unions. This was judged to be in violation of the eighth and sixth commandments. Calling on Heidelberg Catechism Lord's 42 and 40 the consistory showed that the self serving motive of the "closed-shop" policy was at bottom theft and

---

(I have only anecdotal data for this). This is also evident in those people who left the CRC for theological reasons and join the C/ARC but are members of unions.

<sup>17</sup> This was translated by S. Vandergugten [his daughter] in 1992 and is unpublished. A copy is attached as Appendix B. The preamble to this article by E.C. Baartman [EB52] was translated and appears in an extensive study on unions by S. DeBruin. *Clarion* 29, 1980. pg. 299f. (Subsequently these were discovered by the present writer in English in the *Reflector* #18. April 1969.)

<sup>18</sup> E.C. Baartman was the deacon in the first consistory of the New Westminster Consistory [Inheritance Preserved p. 85] and was also a close friend of J.T. van Popta.

<sup>19</sup> This was confirmed in conversation with his son, E.H. Baartman of Hamilton, on April 8, 1992.

murder and members of unions were then guilty of these sins. This precluded any membership at all.

The consistory of New Westminster certainly understood that union membership was an ethical problem to which the Word of God and the Confessions of the Church were able to speak. They applied Scripture and Confession to the question at hand and judged that union membership in the “so-called” neutral unions and membership in the Church were incompatible.

This decision has no semblance or similarity to anything that the CRC decided. At first glance there is some similarity to 1904. This is, however, completely wrong. 1904 was a judgment that laid out the characteristics of unions *not neutral*. NW 51 concerns *so-called neutral unions*. The CRC, throughout its discussion from 1881 to 1957, made a distinction between the two. This distinction was never clearly defined by any one but it served for decades to delineate between what was tolerable and condemned. The so-called neutral unions were acceptable; those with characteristics of unions not neutral were rejected. NW 51, on the other hand, rejects the phrase “so-called” and shows *all* unions to be ungodly, anti-christian, revolutionary and humanistic. The Canadian Reformed response is antithetically opposed to unionism. The CRC response accepted unionism as an economic reality that was a part of the social structure of North America. This difference is not easily explained.

## Van Popta 1952

Rev. J. T. van Popta set his critique on unions within the framework of unionism’s fund-amentals. He rejects the argument that defends unions on the basis that they achieved some good. ...[W]e may not judge unions on the basis of their effectiveness [VP 52:1].” To van Popta, “the deciding question is, “Does submission to these statutes — which is part and parcel of union membership — bring a member into conflict with the Word of God?” If the answer is ‘yes,’ then it is clear that none of us are allowed to become a member of such a union. Every one must order and direct his life in accordance to God’s Word [VP 52:1].”

He writes that we are to confess our God in all walks of life. To support this he presents a long list of texts and confession references. God is also the God of economic order and life. The unions<sup>20</sup> obligate one to deny the

---

<sup>20</sup> Van Popta, as noted by the translator in n.1, pg. 2, uses “Unions” in an unqualified sense. The translator suggests “that we know now that some unions exist that do espouse Scriptural principles.” It should be noted, however, that in 1952 the CLAC, the Canadian arm of the CLA, was first formed. It was a tiny and struggling entity which was not recognized as a union till 1963. Baartman, the New Westminster consistory and van Popta cannot be faulted for not anticipating the birth of a Christian Labour movement in Canada.

Lord as all sufficient God-given Saviour. This first point is defended by quoting, and by allusion to, Scripture and Confessions.

The second objection is to the demand of unconditional obedience, even to laws and rulings not yet made. This he rejected on the same basis that Baartman did. Van Popta adds more Biblical references to buttress his position. He also notes the quasi-religious terminology of “obligation” and “ritual.” These words warn Christians of the ungodly character of union membership.

The union’s [or President’s] decisions are final and are to be abided to, even if there is an appeal pending. The “Liberated” would have been reminded of Article 31 of the Church Order, which figured so prominently in their lives only a few short years before. Decisions of men or councils may not bind the conscience. “It would be a return to bondage [VP 51:4].” The recent history of the Liberation in the Netherlands could explain the strong position against unions taken by these immigrants.

The union’s authority in calling strike action takes away the individual’s responsibility before God in judging whether he may continue working or not. This is an affront to Christian freedom.

Rev. van Popta showed how union membership was disobedience to the command to show honour, love and faithfulness to those in authority over us (Lord’s Day 39). It also breaks the sixth commandment, which instructs us to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy and friendliness toward our neighbour (Q&A 107). It is also against the eighth commandment. Along with Mr. Baartman, Rev. van Popta calls on Revelation 13:17f to argue that the unions’ claim for control of economic life is anti-Christian.

Rev. van Popta calls on 2 Cor 6:14f (as did AG 1945:35f). Here, however, we learn that it is nigh impossible to withdraw from a union. For this reason also no Christian should allow himself to be brought into bondage, for freedom is not easily regained.

## Conclusion

There is a fundamental difference between the CRC and the Canadian Reformed positions. The Canadian Reformed see no possibility for the existence of “so-called” neutral unions. There is no neutral ground. Van Popta read constitutions of various unions and judged that membership in those unions was impossible for Church members. These unions would cause members to be in bondage and break the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 8th commandments. For defense of his position van Popta called on much biblical data. The Canadian Reformed position is the only one of the

extensive writings that called on the confessions, especially the Heidelberg Catechism. The position taken by Baartman, New Westminster and van Popta is understandable in its own context. Western Canada was strongly influenced by the social movements of the first half of this century. When we read, with van Popta, the union documents we can do no other than judge that there is no room for a Christian within their ranks. It may have developed over time that other union documents were studied and that these first decisions concerning unions would need to be modified, but the decisions concerning the documents quoted need to be upheld right to today.

We can learn from the treatment given to unions and unionism by our fathers in 1952. We certainly should not ignore their work. The work done by the CRC in the reports in 1904 and in 1945 certainly can help us to come to a clearer understanding of our own position concerning unions and unionism in our own historical context. The decisions, judgments and observations made then, should stand today for we are still in a context of revolutionary labour movements.

## Bibliography

*Acts and Agenda of Christian Reformed Synods from 1906-1990.*

Baartman, E.C. "The Unions." trans. S. DeBruin. [In S. Debruin. "Our Reformed Response to the Secular Labour Unions." Clarion. 29,1980. pg. 299f.] Originally in "De Unions (Vakbonden)." Jaarboekje: Canadese Gereformeerde Kerken. Ed. J.M. Barendregt, et. al. Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1952. (70-72) [Also subsequently found in *Reflector* #18, April 1969.]

DeVroome, M.H. *Index: Christian Reformed Church Synodical Decisions, 1857-1980.* Kalamazoo: Board of Publications, n.d.

Lewen, A.B. *Index: Christian Reformed Church Synodical Decisions, 1857- 1962.* n.p., n.p., 1965.

Schaver, J.L. *The Polity of the Churches.* vol. 2. 4th ed., Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1956.

Van Dellen, I., M.Monsma. *The Church Order Commentary: Being a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941.

Van Popta, J.T. "Unions." trans. S. Vandergugten. unpublished. 1992. Originally in "De Unions (Vakbonden)." Jaarboekje: Canadese Gereformeerde Kerken. Ed. J.M. Barendregt, et. al. Goes: Oosterbaan & Le

Cointre, 1952. (pg 73-84). [Also subsequently found in *Reflector* #18, April 1969.]

## Appendix A: Christian Reformed Decisions and Reports Concerning Labour Unions

1881-	art 65	- pg 18			- pg 102
1883 -	art 37	- pg 15			- pg 108
1886 -		- pg 26			- pg 112
	art 90	- pg 32			- pg 413
1888 -		- pg 19	1945 -	report	- pg 34
1890 -	art 62	- pg 22f			- pg 87f
1892 -	art 61	- pg 27f			- pg 102f
1900 -		- pg 21		art 100	- pg 103
		- pg 50		report	- pg 304
1902 -	report	- pg 111-137		report	- pg 314-326
1904 -	art 119	- pg 32 - 36		agenda	- pg 28 - 37
1906		- pg 48	1946 -		- pg 27
-	report	- pg 59 - 66			- pg 85
1906 -	art 106	- pg 66		art 141	- pg 103f
1908 -	report	- pg 43			- pg 124
1912 -	art 47	- pg 38			- pg 265f
1914 -	report	- pg 119-130	1947 -		- pg 29
1916 -	art 36	- pg 38f			- pg 89
1924 -		- pg 100	1948 -		- pg 35
-	agenda	- pg 36	1949 -		- pg 86
1926 -		- pg 59f	1950 -		- pg 27f
	agenda	- pg 89-124			- pg 62
1928 -	art 103	- pg 90f			- pg 82
	art 108	- pg 92-95	1951 -		- pg 22
1930 -		- pg 48f			- pg 50
	art 68	- pg 74f			- pg 79
	agendaII	- pg 231-235	1952 -		- pg 54f
1932 -		- pg 101			- pg 83f
1934 -	art 39	- pg 22f	1953-		- pg 71
1936 -		- pg 19			- pg 121-123
1937 -	art 17	- pg 11			- pg 125-128
					- pg 545-550
1939 -		- pg 70			- pg 561f
1940 -		- pg 42	1954 -		- pg 87-92
		- pg 110			- pg 98
	report	- pg 334-344		report	- pg 553-556
1941 -		- pg 22	1955 -		- pg 22f
		- pg 35			- pg 61
1942 -		- pg 132			- pg 66f
	report	- pg 361-386			- pg 91f
1943 -	art 172	- pg 102f	1956 -		- pg 43
	art 174	- pg 103-105			- pg 71
		- pg 116			- pg 105-108
	report	- pg 346	1957-		- pg 71
	agenda	- pg 3 - 25			- pg 108f
1944 -		- pg 61f			- pg 130f

1958 -	- pg 535		1959 -	- pg 577
	- pg 77		1960 -	- pg 129

This appendix was compiled using *Schaver's Polity of the Churches*, Van Dellen and Monsma's *Church Order Commentary [1941]*, and two indices of CRC decisions 1857-1962 and 1857-1980.