

## **SHOULD WE SCRAP THE FORM OF SUBSCRIPTION?**

It is not unusual for us to read in our church bulletins that office-bearers were requested by their Consistory to sign the Form of Subscription. That office-bearers, including ministers and also professors at our Theological College, will be asked, upon the commencement of their task, to sign the Form of Subscription is for us a forgone conclusion.

If the request to sign this form was met with a resolute refusal we would consider the situation to be somewhat peculiar, to say the least. Yet, although we may not have heard of many outright refusals to a consistory's request to sign the Form of Subscription, there have been those who have, for a variety of reasons, questioned this practice. Such is currently the case in the Christian Reformed Church.

In its publication *The Banner* (Let's Drop the Form of Subscription, March 13, 1995), George Stob supplies his fellow church members, in particular office-bearers, with a number of "reasons" as to why they should not yield to the request to sign the Form of Subscription:

- 1)"The Form of Subscription and the creeds to which it refers are almost 400 years old. Since that time new and better insights into Scripture have changed the church's judgment on certain issues..."
- 2)"It is unrealistic and unreasonable to suppose that theologically unschooled elders and deacons, or even many ministers, are by thorough study and competence able to 'declare truthfully and in good conscience before the Lord' that 'all the articles and points of doctrine' in the creeds 'fully agree with the Word of God' and meet the other conditions imposed by the form."
- 3)"It is safe to say that a large number of church office-bearers have not read or have not read carefully the form to which the church calls them to subscribe..."
- 4)"The church has been deprived of the services of capable and devoted people who refuse to stand for office because they cannot in good conscience sign the form... Many others sign the form but with their own mental reservations, which makes the subscription meaningless... (and) involves them in what a court of law would see as perjury."
- 5)"The Form of Subscription is a needless instrument for assuring the faithfulness of elected or appointed church officials... The church bases its judgment of its officers on their fidelity to an infallible Scripture, not on their fidelity to fallible creeds."

George Stob notes that "church officers should be relieved of the unjust burden imposed on them by the terms of that form", and suggests that it would serve the health and integrity of the church to "abandon the unduly stringent requirements of the Form of Subscription."

What can we say about the "reasons" advanced by George Stob for the necessity of office-bearers in the Christian Reformed Church to refuse to sign the Form of Subscription? To begin with, we can affirm that many of the reasons he gives closely parallel the sentiments expressed by a number of people in the Canadian Reformed Churches when they attempt to explain why they do not or cannot consider themselves bound to the Reformed Confessions. We can hear and read such statements as:

- 1) "It is questionable whether every believer must, or even is able to give allegiance to all formulations used in the confessions in order to be admitted to the sacraments."
- 2) "I honestly feel we'd be better off viewing the Confessions simply as some sort of 'Coles' Notes' on the Bible."
- 3) "Let us honestly examine the confessions critically to see whether they are indeed Biblical, and affirm them insofar as they are."
- 4) "Let us not bind ourselves or each other to anything beyond the Scriptures."
- 5) "We bind ourselves to the confessions 'insofar as' or 'to the extent that' they are Scriptural."

We should take note of the fact that in refusing to be bound to the truth of the Word of God as the Church has confessed it, the "reasons" that are advanced for such a refusal are themselves a compromise and distortion of the truth. There is no honest way to be dishonest. When people refuse to accept the truth, they seldom do so by telling the truth.

Most of the times the reasons adduced for such a refusal are unscriptural, dubious, questionable, fallacious, spurious and dishonest. The problem is that many people, including office-bearers, simply do not want to "declare truthfully and in good conscience before the Lord that we sincerely believe that all the articles and points of doctrine set forth in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort fully agree with the Word of God."

They consider their own opinions and personal views to be of greater importance or significance than the true and authentic survey of the confessed doctrine of the Church. This is clearly evident in George Stob's claim that "it is unrealistic and unreasonable to suppose that theologically unschooled elders and deacons... are... able to declare truthfully... that all articles and points of doctrine in the creeds fully agree with the Word of God." Yet these same "theologically unschooled elders and deacons" are able, in spite of their self confessed academic limitations, to state with some conviction and clarity that the creeds are outdated (400 years old), and that they themselves have arrived at "new and better insights into Scripture."

Another point that should not escape our attention is the statement that "we should not bind ourselves or each other to anything beyond the Scriptures" and that "we bind ourselves to the confessions 'insofar as' or 'to the extent that' they are Scriptural." Such a statement is clearly not Reformed. We accept the confession of the church not "insofar as" or "to the extent" that they are Scriptural, but because they are Scriptural. "We accept together that the Reformed confessions agree in all things with the Word of God and are therefore to be accepted fully as containing the true doctrine of the Scriptures. We confess that the doctrine of the Old and New Testament is summarized in the confessions and that therefore, when we accept these confessions, we accept the teaching of Scripture itself.

To avoid wrong perceptions or perhaps accusations of being "confessionalist" (whatever that may mean) we must state that we do not "consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with Scriptures...; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself." (Art. 7, B.C.) Even the confessions of the church are not of equal value with the Word of God. Yet it is completely in line with Reformed thinking to say that "the confessions are a

norm in the church, but a norm which itself is normalized by Scripture. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith. (Art. 7, B.C.) The confessions of the church are subject to revision, as soon as evidence is adduced that they teach anything contrary to God's Word. But - and this has to be stressed in our falsely ecumenical age - as long as contradiction to the Scripture cannot be demonstrated, the confessions retain their authority in the church. For in her confession the church repeats the Word of God." (J. Faber, Scripture and Confessions, IHA, April 1970)

"The Bible is the norm or standard for our confession, both in its contents and its manner. The Word of God is the infallible foundation for confession, and the source of truth. Our creeds are a true summary and interpretation of God's Word." (N. Kloosterman, Christian Renewal, Sept. 3, 1990)

"When the Church no longer says 'thus says the Lord' then the Church is finished as a pillar and bulwark of the truth. For that reason the Church must maintain the authority of the confession for the sake of her life ..." (J. Munneke)

The Reformed Form of Subscription for office-bearers uses the word "because": we, office-bearers, bind ourselves to the confessions because they agree with the Word of God, not: "insofar" (in as far as) or "to the extent that," That is pure relativism and subjectivism. "The key word is because; 'because they agree with the Word of God', therefore we bind ourselves to Scripture in the Confession. That is not confessionalism, or super-imposing the doctrine of the Church on Scripture. By means of the confession, the Church guards the Word of God against every wind of doctrine." (J. Munneke, The Church and the Confessions, Diakonia, June, 1989)

Shall we scrap the Form of Subscription as George Stob suggests? Certainly not! Are the office-bearers the only church members who are fully bound to our Reformed confession? Definitely not! The true confession is not the confession of office-bearers alone, but of the whole church and all its members together. To maintain and teach this truth privately and publicly is, in particular, the task of the office-bearers, but it is no less the obligation of all members to receive and promote this truth. If we don't care about Creeds and Confessions anymore, let's be honest and say so.

If we do, let's ensure some confessional orthodoxy by binding ourselves to the confession (The Three Forms of Unity) in order to be bound to Scripture, and then also holding each other to the accepted standard.

Ron Dykstra

### **THE OPEN TAP**

(This article, first published in a church magazine in 1921, was written by Prof. K. Schilder)  
Translated by Rev. J. Moesker

I translated this article from the Dutch for a catechism class discussion. The translation may not be perfect or complete, but I believe the sense of this article is conveyed adequately enough for all to see the sharpness as well as the timelessness of what Schilder wrote.

It was carnival time again. And evil things were bound to take place; drunkenness, loud music, night-life, immorality, lewdness. That's what happened every year.

So some people established an anti-carnival committee and asked me to speak at a gathering. I wasn't too enthusiastic about everything this organization stood for, but I agreed to the request because I was allowed to say what I wanted.

So I spoke on a certain evening about the peculiarity of the fact that there are liberal and completely decent people who maintain a lot of what is right and respectable, who gladly work for the "good of all", who are busy with all kinds of philanthropy, who shed tears for charitable organizations ("neutral" ones), who set up homes for girls in trouble, using government grants and money raised at bazaars. People who build rehab centers for alcoholics, or who take measures to protect the lives of illegitimate children - but who, every year again, wipe away all opposition to the vote in favour of this foolish form of entertainment for lifeless souls and foolish rabble. I went so far as to say that they act like people who have lost their senses.

By way of illustration, I told them that I had once read a sermon by the well-known American evangelist Billy Sunday, in which he stated the following:

Do you know what they do in some insane asylums when they want to find out if an insane person has come to his senses again? They put him in a room with a stone floor and a running water-tap, and they give the patient a mop and tell him to mop the floor dry. If he has enough sense to turn off the tap before commencing to mop the floor, he is discharged from the institution. But if he leaves the tap running, it means that he is still insane. That's what you're trying to do. You're trying to mop up with taxes on alcohol, with asylums, jails, therapy and institutions for rehabilitation. But the thing that you should do is - cut off the source!

Thus far Billy Sunday! Now I wasn't going to speak there about what the government is supposed to do about substance abuse, though that's what Billy Sunday had in mind. I only used his illustration because it shows very clearly the foolishness of doctors who are upset that they have to treat "carnival girls" who have been sexually mistreated in Rotterdam during carnival-time, but who are nevertheless in favour of carnival. It illustrates the foolishness of government officials who take measures against lewdness, and who never-the-less encourage it themselves again with carnival parades and drinking. It shows the stupidity of those who speak out in favour of decent work and its necessity in society, but who nevertheless greet all that ruins decency with broadminded tolerance.

When I was finished speaking, I was nicely thanked on behalf of the committee. Afterwards various others were given the floor. I remember especially one person who had a passionate speech to persuade people not to take part in the carnival. He spoke long and loud, moving his arms and rolling his eyes and stamping his feet, as if it was a matter of life and death. A zealous man, I thought. He's fully aware of the dangers of carnival. And even though his speech left some things to be desired as far as civility is concerned, I thought: this speaker is doing his best to mop the floor dry. He'd love to turn off the tap...

But those thoughts received a sobering letdown the next day. I had just visited a sick person, a member of the Reformed church. We had spoken about things that occupy the heart in times of sickness, and it was a joy to speak with that person. But just when I closed the door behind me to go home, I came face to face with the speaker of the previous evening at the anti-carnival meeting.

He greeted me in a friendly way, most likely because I had been his colleague who had helped him mop the floor the previous evening. I like a collegial feeling like that, as long as it finds confirmation in fact. But that was lacking here. For now this man antagonized me. Even though he greeted me and touched his hat and smiled at me, I noticed under his arm a large bundle of newspapers. I won't mention the name of the paper he was carrying. Let me just say this: it was a very liberal rag, one of the worst kind. It was one of those sensationalist newspapers, full of useless articles, anti-Christian or at least indifferent to Christianity, a paper in which only a tiny corner was reserved for church or faith, but in which all kinds of room is given for coverage of sports and cinema and a variety of immorality including the carnival. And with his free hand he greeted me. My anti-carnival friend then put one of those pro-carnival newspapers into the mailbox of my Reformed sick person.

On the previous evening we had exerted ourselves together in mopping up. But now he left me in the cold, and he turned on the tap which I had tried to shut off. And he still does that. I'll keep an eye open for him when it's carnival time again. If he shows up, I'll tell him about his news rag.

Fortunately on the next visit I was able to convince my sick friend to subscribe to a Christian newspaper. I wrote the subscription out myself and mailed it. But I'm not finished yet...

Oh you Reformed people, you orthodox ones. Why do you call ministers to mop the floor, why do you elect elders and send out evangelists to mop the floor while you don't turn off the tap; the tap of the press, the media, etc? In other words, why do you read the "Rotterdam News" or the "Rotterdam Daily" or "The Telegraph" or "The Paper", why so many other godless or anti-religious papers while you let your own media struggle to keep publishing? If you can pay for the other newspapers by the week, why not do that with our own papers? Is it because the others are cheaper? Well, our papers can compete fairly well yet because others contribute extra to cover what you withhold. But even if they would be three times as expensive, then you'd be to blame for that too. The haters of religion profit from your two dimes a week and put it towards their anti-church activities again. And our Christian media - they're left looking for your two dimes. And they won't get them.

And what happens later on? Well, later the consistory has to make a visit to your son because he has joined an anti-Christian labour union. Then the consistory is supposed to mop the floor of your house. But you opened the media-tap for him every day at home, and you kept from him the values and views which expose the lies of the modern trade-union movement.

Later your children, as soon as they're able, will go to dirty shows - twelve murders, thirteen break-ins, and one adulterous relationship for a nickel. And then the minister is allowed to come to your place to mop the floor. But you have left the tap wide open. After all, in the ads and reviews the stars are glorified as if they can show what life is really all about and can save the world. And your son learns from the paper where he can go to take part and to dance and what not.

Later you'll complain about the ignorance among church people about church matters and church trends. You shake your head about members of your church or even your family who don't know anything about our schools and our political task. And the minister has to go to meetings to save what can still be saved. He has to mop the floor. But you leave the tap open. And when the minister exhorts you about your Christian calling with respect to the Christian media, then you turn the dime

that is meant for our media over and over - that dime which your family later puts into the modem trade union movement which murders the church and proclaims revolution, or it ends up in the cash register of the cinema, with the powdered ladies.

Whoever speaks out at anti-carnival meetings should not be the deliverer of godless papers. And do me a favour. If this article applies to you or to one of your friends, don't say: That Billy Sunday sure knows how to say it - only to go and drink a cup of coffee again. Write out subscriptions to a Reformed paper yourself, and invite your friends to do the same. And stop your subscription to that so-called "neutral" paper.

And do it right away, please.

Remember your own local media, especially the church magazines. If you're serious about mopping up, make sure you turn off the tap. Right away! That's the requirement for a sound mind. It's also part of being upright and godly.

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The truth Schilder expresses here is as contemporary as the day on which it was written, isn't it? For there is mopping up today too. And is the tap simply left open?

### ***IN REVIEW...***

The Acts of Synod Abbotsford 1995 have been distributed. According to some, only now may the press comment on the decisions made. We hope to review the Acts and present some comment in the months to come. We also encourage our readers to review this document in a serious manner and share with us any praise or concerns that may arise from such review. Also in this way may we be active and living members of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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During the month of August, 500 people gathered for two days to listen to a number of speakers at eleven sessions on various aspects of the significance of the Church. The event was organized by Ligonier Ministries. The speeches, as reported in Christian Renewal of Sept. 11, 1995 are of interest because of what several of the speakers said concerning the church.

For those who want to downplay doctrine in favour of unity, R.C. Sproul emphasized that doctrine is critical to understanding of God. "To say doctrine is irrelevant is treasonous to our Lord, it is treasonous to the martyrs who stood for truth, it is treasonous to Jesus Christ who came to bear witness to the truth and who died for it".

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A professor David Wells from Gordon-Cornell Seminary in Boston said that what ails the church today is a loss of bold-ness, "a boldness that is sustained by a conviction about truth...The problem is that the church is less certain today about what it believes."

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A Reformed Baptist minister, John Armstrong, said that the church no longer thinks biblically and corporately today. The emphasis in the church is on individual salvation. Armstrong stressed the importance of church membership, and encouraged the use and development of gifts for the benefit of the church “to help the body reach maturity.”

Although we can agree with many of the thoughts expressed at this event, we remain disappointed by the lack of understanding about the true nature of the church. John Van Dyk, author of the article in Christian Renewal noted that the speakers, led by R.C. Sproul, were for the most part regulars to the Ligonier lecture circuit whose messages educate, inspire, and challenge listeners to faithful service in the life of their respective churches. Doctrine is indeed not irrelevant. Neither is the doctrine of the church. The tolerance that condones a variety of “churches” bears witness to the refusal to seek, in obedience, the unity commanded by the Head of the Church.

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