

FEEL FREE TO DISAGREE

Credal Subscription and Mental Reservations

In the September 29th issue of Reformed Polemics we considered George Stob's proposal to get rid of the Form of Subscription. We noted that the "reasons" advanced for the need to drop this form were questionable, unscriptural and dishonest. Stob's pious sounding proposal is in the final analysis nothing more than an unwillingness to be fully bound to the accepted doctrinal standards of the Church, in particular the Three Forms of Unity. We also noted that the views expressed by George Stob are not solely the sentiments of some members of the Christian Reformed Church. There are also members in the Canadian Reformed Churches who, although they are willing to sign the Form of Subscription and are disposed to consider themselves bound to the Reformed creeds, do so with "mental reservations." They bind themselves to the confession "insofar as" or "to the extent that" they are Scriptural. They appropriate for themselves the right to decide what is and what is not Scriptural in the Reformed confession. They feel free to disagree. The objective and authentic survey of the confessed doctrine of the Church is put aside to facilitate the subjective preferences and opinions of the individual. With these developments we have once more returned to the struggle and problems of the year 1816 when the matter of those who have "mental reservations" about the confession of the Church became the impetus for changes to the Form of Subscription.

"In 1816 the Form of Subscription of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands underwent a significant change. Officebearers were then required to accept the confessions of the church not because these accord with the Scriptures, but insofar as they accord with the Scriptures ... This seemingly slight change, in effect, destroyed the binding to the confession and proved to be an opening for a multitude of intolerable heresies. Officebearers were no longer bound to the creeds, but were guided by their own insights and views. While the confession officially still played a role in the church, it had practically ceased to function. Gross liberalism resulted. The Reformed Churches of the First and Second Secessions returned to the Form of Subscription as it was before 1816: accepting the confessions because these accord with the Scriptures." (a) No room was left for enter-taining doubts, signing the form tongue-in-cheek, or with mental reservations. Signing the Form of Subscription became once more an expression of wholehearted agreement with the confessions.

The Reformed position that not only officebearers, but all church members are fully bound to the exact text of the accepted doctrinal standard has not been readily accepted outside the Reformed community. The Presbyterians' struggle with the matter of credal subscription or confessional membership dates back to the Adopting Act of 1729. The Adopting Act was the result of attempts by the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists to resolve their differing views on the Westminster Standard and so come to union as one American Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterians wanted the Standards to be binding upon the office bearers, while the Congregationalists only wanted the Standards as non-binding guides. Charles Hodge, in his book *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the USA*, states that the Adopting Act of 1729 "was intended to require of new members nothing more than assent to the essential doctrines of the gospel, and yet the

doctrinal standards of the church might be something very different and far higher.” We note here, among other things, the use of the words “essential doctrines”, and we also note that this distinction will readily accommodate those who would like to decide for themselves what is essential and what is not. Church members are given liberal latitude for all sorts of scruples and mental reservations.

In his book *The Westminster Confession and Creeds*, Robert L. Dabney makes a rather revealing statement: “We expressly repudiate the claim of right or authority to dismiss, exclude or expel any person, lay or clerical, from the catholic or universal Church of Christ on the mere ground of his dissent from or rejection of parts of our creed.” People are allowed to believe what they like without fear of being dismissed, excluded or expelled from the church; they are free to disagree. We encounter here the ideal climate for all sorts of scruples and mental reservations.

The statements of Charles Hodge and Robert L. Dabney have often been trivialized or summarily dismissed by those who maintain that in the OPC there is wholehearted acceptance of the confessional standards and that the OPC can truly be called a confessional church. A proper reading of the Act of Adoption will confirm quite the opposite and will fully substantiate what Hodge and Dabney stated. The Act contains basically two parts.

The first part reads, “And (we) do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted to this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.”

The second part of this Act deals with the admission of candidates to the ministry. Such candidates shall declare their “agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession”, either by a written or oral declaration. If any candidate or minister has any scruples about any article or articles of these Standards, he shall be allowed such opinions “if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.”

“So one accepts the ‘system of doctrine’ contained in the Standards, but is not bound to ‘extra-essential and not-necessary points of doctrine.’ In traditional American Presbyterianism, there is certainly no binding to the literal text and all the articles of the adopted Standards.” (b) We are therefore not amiss in questioning the Presbyterian position on confessional membership.

In the progress report of the combined meeting of the Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC) and the Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) of February 27, 1990 we read that the OPC members “also question the Canadian Reformed practice of confessional membership...” The fact that the OPC questions confessional membership should not surprise us. Historically, Presbyterian churches have not envisioned the people subscribing to the standards in the same way we are committed to the Three Forms of Unity. That is precisely why the issue of confessional membership continues to be a point of contention and debate in our discussions with the OPC. It is therefore not, as was suggested in a number of articles in *Clarion**,

simply a case of some confusion about the decision of 1729 that was resolved in 1736, or that in 1751 certain misrepresentations concerning the constitution, order and discipline of the Presbyterian churches were industriously spread by some members of Dutch congregations ... with the purpose to prevent occasional or constant communion of their members with our churches. Nor is the matter of subscription to the confessional standards a matter of a wrong perception that has arisen among us, or a misunderstanding of what Presbyterianism is all about. It is simply the fact that historically, in both the Reformed as well as the Presbyterian churches, there have been continuing struggles on the matter of the subscription to the confessional standards. There have always been those, whether Reformed or Presbyterian, who simply do not want to accept the position that a members are fully bound to the exact text of the accepted doctrinal standards. Such a strong binding for all members is generally seen as being unnecessary and undesirable. Why? Because it leaves no room for subjective preferences and personal opinions; no allowances for mental reservations; no freedom to disagree.

When we read the Acts of General Synod 1995 regarding our relationship with the OPC, we are informed that “the practices with respect to the admission of guests at the Lord’s table, confessional membership, and contact with the CRC have not been proven to undermine the OPC’s confessional integrity as a true Church.”(p. 71, B. 3) Upon reading the “We are therefore not amiss in questioning the Presbyterian position on confessional membership” address of the fraternal delegate of the OPC, Rev. J. J. Peterson, we get a totally different perspective. He notes that in a number of OPC churches there are many new converts who are Baptists, and then states that “we feel, we cannot, we must not, exclude them from the body of Christ and the sacraments.” (p. 97) Room is made for people who have mental reservations on points of doctrine. These people disapprove of infant baptism and therefore either refuse or neglect to baptize their infant children, but are nevertheless full fledged (confessional) members in the OPC and they are allowed to attend the Lord’s Table. Contrary to Synod’s assertion, these practices bring into question the confessional integrity of the OPC as a true Church. Pastoral concern takes precedence over doctrinal integrity. Gaining and retaining new converts becomes more important than upholding and defending the truth. Church members can subscribe to the Standards and yet retain the freedom to have their mental reservations. They are free to disagree but are nevertheless welcome to the Lord’s Table.

We note that historically the Presbyterian Churches have subscribed to the Standards inasmuch as they find them to be biblical and not because they are biblical. The profession required of members is less than that required of office-bearers and it is a profession which is not to be judged by the standards of the church. “We find the Presbyterian subscription to the confession ‘as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures’ rather vague, and the distinction between essential and non-essential articles is equally vague and extremely dangerous. To what extent are Presbyterians really bound to their adopted Standards? Is individual freedom here not being elevated at the cost of true confessional unity?”

We may, as members of the Reformed Churches, speak and write only in accordance with the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions. We may not promote any teaching contrary to this confession. This does not restrict our individual or editorial freedom. For the confessions contain the truth of God's Word, and the Truth makes us free." (c) No room for "mental reservations"! We are not free to disagree! We are all fully bound to the exact text of the accepted doctrinal standards. This binding to the Reformed confession gives us all the freedom we need.

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(a) (b) (c) Clarence Stam, "Creedal Subscription", Reformed Perspective, August, 1985.

- See C. Van Dam, "Church Membership and Baptism", Clarion, May 5, 1995 and E. Kampen, "The Subscription

Debate", Clarion, August 25, 1995

THE CHURCH SERVICE

The following two articles are by Rev. A. VanDelden and first appeared in *Una Sancta*, September, 1995.

(1) Covenantal Communication

When I was preparing myself for admission to seminary, I received private instruction in the Hebrew language from a Jewish woman, Naomi. This was over a two-year period, which meant that we got to know each other quite well. From time to time she asked what our church service was like. There was no better way to describe it than by inviting her to attend, which she did on one occasion. Sometime later I asked her what she thought. I knew that our church service was nowhere as "exciting" as some other churches, especially charismatic ones. I thought that she might find it somewhat dull. Yet she responded in a surprising way. She said that our service was rather similar to her synagogue service.

I suppose that should not have surprised me. After all, our church service is based upon an Old Testament principle. Our church service is covenantal. By this I mean that there are two parties in communion with one another. To use a modern catch-word, our church service is a dialogue between God and His people. And that is the way it was in the Old Testament as well.

Consider the layout of the temple. There were basically three parts to it. The elements of the temple service consisted of God speaking to His people, and His people responding to God. The role of the priests was to mediate between God and His people. We follow this same covenantal principle in our church service where God speaks to the congregation, and the congregation speaks to God. It is covenantal in as much as there are two parties in communion with one another.

We stress that there are two parties (God and the congregation), and not three (God, the minister and the congregation). The minister is no more than a spokesman either for God or the congregation. He should remember this, as should the congregation. The minister should not

address the congregation personally; neither should the congregation address the minister personally. All that he says should be on behalf of God or on behalf of the people. Strictly speaking, even the announcements do not belong in the worship service according to this covenantal principle. The consistory should not address the congregation during the church service. If there are announcements to be made, they could more properly be made before the “call to worship” (Lift up your hearts to God) or after the service, or still better, in the bulletin.

There are occasions when the congregation needs no spokesman, when the congregation can address God with one united voice. We do this in our singing. One liturgical change which some of our churches have made is the singing of the Apostle’s Creed, rather than have the minister recite it on behalf of the congregation. This might appear to be a new element, but it really is not. While reading the Acts of the Synod of Dort 1618/19, I stumbled across one article which recommended certain hymns for use in the church, one of which was the Apostle’s Creed. That is over 350 years ago! Whether this is an improvement upon the recitation of the creed by the minister is debatable, but it could hardly be considered an impoverishment. Some have little appreciation for the tune, but the school children seem to appreciate it well enough!

There is also some talk in sister churches of having the congregation respond to God’s blessing and the proclamation of His Word by saying “Amen” in unison. This is to heighten the awareness that when the minister says “Amen”, he is saying it on behalf of the congregation.

When the minister has given the blessing or proclaimed the word as God’s spokesman, he quickly reverses his role and becomes the congregation’s spokesman when he says “Amen.”

Some of our leading Reformed liturgists² are of the opinion that the congregation can respond itself, in unison, and that this practice should be given back to the congregation.

We say “given back” for Dr. Deddens shows that this was the custom,³ but at some point prior to the Reformation it was taken from the congregation and given to the priests.

The Reformers, however, did not revert to the custom of the early church, and in general it has been the custom of the Reformed Churches to have the minister say “Amen” on behalf of the congregation, and to have the congregation respond with what is called an “Amen-song”.

REFERENCES:

1. G. Van Dooren, *The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy*, Premier, 1980, pg. 18ff.
2. G. Van Dooren, *ibid.*, pg. 37, K. Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him, Inheritance*, 1993, pp. 153-160; G. van Rongen, *Zijn Schone Dienst*, pp. 114-118; C. Trimp, *De Gemeente en Hoar Liturgie*, van de Berg, pg. 100
3. Deddens, *op. cit.*, pg. 157

(2) *The Genevan Psalter*

We mentioned that our churches maintain a covenantal liturgy. That means that our church service can be characterized as a meeting between God and His people. God addresses us through the ministry of His Word, and we, His people, respond in singing and prayer, in making confession of

faith, and in giving our offerings. The people of God do not only listen; they also respond. They are active participants in the church service.

In the time prior to the Reformation the congregation was made quite passive. The people could not interact with what they heard, for the church service was conducted in Latin, which the average person could not understand. The congregation did not have Bibles in their possession which they could read for themselves. When it came to singing, many of the songs were sung in Latin, and were unknown to the congregation. Further, the songs were sung, not by the congregation, but by trained choirs. Thus there was little active participation in the church service prior to the Reformation.

The Reformers, however, sought to restore the covenantal character of the church service. The Word of God was preached in the language that the people spoke and understood. And choirs were replaced with congregational singing. Congregational singing is said to have ceased around 400 AD. But Calvin re-introduced it in Strasbourg, Geneva. He appointed poets to rhyme the psalms and musicians to compose tunes for them. This work began around 1540. It was a monumental task, for the rhyming of the Psalms had to be done with great care. The original meaning of the psalm could not be sacrificed for the sake of rhythm or rhyme. Furthermore, the tunes had to be "tailor-made" to suit the content of each psalm. Two years before Calvin died (1564) the Reformed Church in Strasbourg was able to sing all 150 Psalms in the church service, and even some Hymns (The Songs of Mary, Zachariah and Simeon).

The churches in the Netherlands looked with envy at the French Churches. They also desired to sing the Psalms in their own language. In 1566 Petrus Dathenus translated the French Psalter into Dutch. For more than two hundred years his rhyming was used in the Dutch churches. Thereafter revisions (1773, 1949) appeared which sought to improve or update the Psalter in the Dutch language.

When members of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (Liberated) immigrated to English speaking lands they realized that there was a need for a Genevan Psalter in English. In 1954 the Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches appointed a committee for this purpose. Although a number of Genevan Psalms in English could be found in the Psalter Hymnal of reformed churches in the United States and in Canada, the complete Genevan Psalter did not appear until 1972. A revised edition appeared in 1980.

When we consider the history of the Genevan Psalter, we might ask why the churches of the Reformation chose to sing the Psalms. Why didn't Calvin request men to write their own songs of praise? Calvin was a catholic thinker. He knew that the history of the Church went back to the old dispensation. In establishing the character of the liturgy of the Reformed Churches, he sought to maintain the Church's link to the past. The Psalms were sung by the saints in the old dispensation. Furthermore, the Psalms are inspired by God. There are many nice songs written by men, but the Psalms are the inspired Word of God. Scripture tells us that the Spirit of God spoke by David when he wrote the psalms that he did (cf. 2 Sam 23:2). What better songs could the church sing than those written by God Himself? In singing the Psalms, the Church sings the songs that God gave it.

The Psalms are one of the many links which we have to the Church of the old dispensation. We are singing the psalms that our spiritual forefathers have sung 3,000 years ago! And the tunes link us to

the Reformers. We are singing the Psalms to tunes that they wrote about 430 years ago. When I think about these things I feel like a small dot on a long line. I have come to love the Genevan Psalter.

The Twenty-Third Channel

(Author unknown)

The television is my shepherd, my spiritual life doth want.

It maketh me to sit down and do nothing.

It leadeth me beside men of no faith.

It restoreth my desire for worldly pleasures.

It requireth all my spare time and keepeth me from doing the will of God because it presented! so much foolishness which I must see.

It increased! my knowledge of nonsense and keepeth me from the study of die Word of God.

Yea, though I live to be a hundred, yet the viewing of my television shall have first place in my life as long as it doth operate, for it is my closest company,

Its sound and its picture, they comfort me.

It presenteth foolishness and folly before me continually and keepeth me from surrendering my whole life to God.

It anoints my head with seeds of corruption and fills my head with vanity, which profiteth nothing; and my cup remains empty.

Surely no good thing shall come to my life, because I am devoted to my television, which leaveth me no time to serve God acceptably.

Thus I will dwell in die house of confusion forever.