

1996 - A NEW YEAR...

### **AND STILL POLEMICS**

All of us who participate in Reformed Polemics, would like to take this opportunity to express the hope that our readers will receive blessings from our heavenly Father during the coming year. We pray that we may all receive the wisdom and strength to serve Him in our various endeavors. In our continuing efforts to discuss matters of current interest and debate, we wish to be instruments in His hand to further the glory of His Name.

Recently we read a remark in Christian Renewal that applies equally well to our own situation. We read, "When one writes, he seeks to put thoughts into words which can be accurately understood; and the real test of whether one has succeeded is in hearing from those who differ with him. It is not that difficult to get through to those who agree; they have their own way of filling in where one's presentation is weak. It is from those who object that one discovers whether he expressed himself as he ought; and,... it would appear that there remains much that has not yet been made clear ... And still, if there is to be theological development in our conservative Reformed community, we are going to have to learn to communicate together about our doctrinal differences with mutual kindness and concern and respect." (a)

It is evident from some reader response that what we as editors write, say, or at least what we intended to affirm or express, is not necessarily the same as what our readers read, discern, apprehend or understand. Such a situation can be the result of biased or flawed and faulty writing. It can also be the consequence of prejudiced or selective and defective reading. And last but not least, we can find ourselves in such a predicament because we don't see eye to eye on the matters under discussion. We just happen to disagree with the opinions expressed, and therefore the aim of truly understanding each other can at times become an almost impossible objective. Under these circumstances there is an increased need for further and continued discussion on the matters at hand. We are then obliged to again engage in Reformed polemics.

"The word 'polemics' is defined as 'the art or practice of disputation or controversy; specifically polemic theology, which has for its object refutation of errors' ... From a biblical viewpoint we may say that polemics is required as an exercise of Christian love toward the neighbour." (b) If there are issues that divide us we must make every effort to communicate together with mutual kindness, concern and respect. That continues to be our aim in 1996.

As we go forward in the Year of Our Lord 1996, we seek His ways, His comfort, and His blessing. Then we may rest assured that He will prosper our undertakings.

*The Editors*

- a) Bernard Woudenberg, "The Protestant Reformation & the Covenant", Christian Renewal, Oct. 23, 1995.
- b) c) Rev. Cl. Stam, "The Polemics of Love", Clarion, June, 1989.

Feature Article

## **PROFESSION AND PRACTICE**

No one expressed disagreement with the editorial “Shall We Scrap the Form of Subscription?” (Reformed Polemics, Sept. 29, 1995) The same could not be said for “Feel Free to Disagree” (Oct. 27, 1995) Perhaps for some the title of this editorial constituted an open invitation to express a contrary opinion. However, the very fact that the controversial and contentious issue of creedal subscription or confessional membership was dealt with in this editorial was sufficient to guarantee at least some comment, discussion and response, particularly when we put this matter into the context of our contact with the OPC.

The intent of the editorial “Feel Free to Disagree” was, among other things, to reiterate that “when the OPC churches say they hold to the Westminster Standards, they mean something vastly different than what we mean when we say that we hold to the Three Forms of Unity.” (a) If this is not true, why would the OPC Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) “also question the Canadian Reformed practice of confessional membership”? (b) Why should they question something they can readily agree with? Simply put, they question this Reformed practice because, by their own admission, they consider this practice to be too restrictive, unnecessary, undesirable, and even exclusivist and sectarian.

We noted in our discussions that the aforementioned sentiments are not the exclusive jurisdiction of OPC members. At times we hear similar sentiments expressed by professing members of Reformed churches, also the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

In the latest issue of Christian Renewal (December 18, 1995) we read about a former member of the CanRC who “liberated” himself from the decision of Synod 1989, article 169, by withdrawing from the Church. Why did he withdraw?

Because Synod upheld the wording of the second question in the Form for Infant Baptism. The second question to the parents reads: “Second, do you confess that the doctrine of the Old and New Testament summarized in the Confessions and taught here in this Christian Church, is the true and complete doctrine of salvation?” The decision of Synod in this matter was considered by the writer to be “a ‘yoke’ upon the individual believers that is not from the Word of God ... Using the word ‘Confessions’ was unprecedented, as it replaced the more universal phrase ‘articles of the Christian faith ...’”

This decision is, according to the writer, “sectarian and not in accordance with Scripture.” We note that preference is expressed for the more universal phrase “articles of the Christian faith”, because the words “the doctrine of the Old and New Testament, summarized in the Confessions and taught here in this Christian Church” are perceived to be too restrictive and even sectarian. The validity of the Reformed practice of confessional membership is questioned not only by the OPC, but also by those who claim to be Reformed.

The relevant issue is the matter of confessional membership, and the difference in this point between the OPC and the CanRC. It is acknowledged that “in the OPC there is a greater variety of practice concerning what is expected of those who make public profession of faith.” That “variety of practice” underlines the weakness in the OPC on the point of confessional membership. Some Orthodox Presbyterian churches may promote or suppose agreement of the membership with the confessional standards while others don’t. There may still be with many OP churches a preference to hold onto the things confessed, but in practice it really does not matter anymore. It is therefore little wonder that the question of “confessional membership” has come to the fore in the context of our discussions with the OPC. The point at issue is that it is not officially asked of those who make profession of faith whether they “wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God ... taught here in this Christian church.”

The first question in the OPC form for the public profession of faith, speaking about the doctrine, speaks about the doctrine of the Bible. Baptists, Armenians, and so on, will all say that they believe the doctrine of the Bible. Therefore, just as in all the centuries of the history of the Christian church, this “doctrine of the Bible” needs further specification over against errors and heresies. The Confessions show us what in history has been summarized by the Church as the truth of the Word of God. Without the confession there can not be a unity of the faith.

Yet the OPC does not readily accept the position that all members are to be fully bound to the exact text of their confessional standards. They find such a position difficult to endorse and support because they are guided, in both their profession and practice, by the fundamental belief that the Church of Christ is basically invisible and manifests itself in various denominations, also in varying degrees of purity...

The distinction true and false has been replaced with the distinction “pure” and “less pure” churches. “It all boils down to this, i.e., all denominations have a right to exist and are significant for the whole, since pluralism and pluriformity are important characteristics of the one invisible Church. No Church may claim purity in doctrine, liturgy, and polity, although the one may be somewhat ‘purer’ than the other. Each makes his own attempt at serving God in the best way possible, and all are assured of their own efforts, in the great invisible Church of Christ.”(c) Given the Westminster definition of the church, it is difficult to see how the OPC can avoid the practice of pluralism or pluriformity of the church. Even though a church claims to maintain its confessions, as soon as it practices church-pluriformity, it has, in fact, undermined its own confession.

In a letter to the editor, (Clarion, March 24, 1995) Mrs. Stephen Brown of Laurel spoke from “many years of experience” when she stated that when “the OPC churches say they hold to the Westminster Standards, they mean something vastly different than we mean when we say we hold to the Three Forms of Unity.” Although Dr. C. Van Dam responded by stating that “it is difficult to carry on a fruitful discussion simply on the basis of personal experiences ...”, yet in a subsequent paragraph Dr. Van Dam himself uses the testimony of another OPC member to confirm that “also in the OPC it is the exception and not the rule that someone has difficulty with some point of doctrine and is received into the church.” To give further credence to this statement Dr. Van Dam

quotes the retired OPC minister, Rev. G. I. Williamson who said: "In discussing this matter with some of the pastors and elders of the Canadian Reformed Churches, I get the distinct impression that there is hardly any difference at all when it comes to actual practice." (Ordained Servant, Jan., 1994)

We noted in the October 27, 1995 editorial that "when it comes to actual practice" on the matter of confessional membership, Rev. J. J. Peterson stated that "we feel, we cannot, we must not, exclude from the body of Christ and the sacraments" many new converts who are Baptists. In actual practice the OPC continues to accept members who have mental reservations about infant baptism, even though this point of doctrine is clearly articulated in their confessional standards. Dr. Van Dam argues that the OPC "should be judged by its confessional standards and any other official documents that deal with the issue at hand", but such a judgment is of little value if there is no correlation between what is professed and what is actually practiced. Nor is it helpful when the confessional standards are ambiguous, confusing, and lacking in clarity. Rev. Williamson's testimony that there is hardly any difference at all between the OPC and the Canadian Reformed Churches when it comes to actual practice is definitely not confirmed by the manner in which he himself celebrates the Lords Supper.

We read in Christian Renewal of April 25, 1994, that in the OPC church at Hull, Iowa, pastored by the Rev. G. I. Williamson, the Lord's Supper was celebrated by a small group of Reformed believers. We are told that "there were almost as many different Reformed affiliations present as there were pieces of bread." This "actual practice" in celebrating the Lord's Supper and the actual practice of admitting Baptists into the membership of the OPC is the consequence of a church view that embodies the notion of pluriformity. Such a view cannot be squared with either Scripture or the Three Forms of Unity. Yet such a view is the announced basis of church unity with the OPC, when it comes to what it professes and "when it comes to actual practice."

We may well ask, "How is it possible that someone who makes profession of faith, who declares the Reformed doctrine as found in the confessions to be the true doctrine, and who promises to abide by it and to submit to the Reformed consistory, can maintain with an honest conscience that it is wrong to have his infants baptized? How can a Reformed consistory "admit" such a person who asks to become a member and states his Baptist point of view? The issue is that in our churches those who make profession of faith declare that they 'wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confession and taught here in this Christian church'; and they promise to abide by it through God's grace. The issue is that this is not asked from, nor declared by those who make profession of faith in the OPC." (d)

Br. Wayne Chase summarizes the matter when he states, "There is clearly no provision for admitting practicing Reformed Baptists into the membership of the Canadian Reformed Churches. One either submits to Reformed doctrine in all points as confessed in the confessions, or indeed steadfastly fights against all heresies and errors, or one does not take such a vow. It is not possible to relativize this language by alluding to the different theological, confessional, ecclesiastical, historical, or cultural traditions that may or may not stand between the Canadian Reformed

churches and the OPC. Truth is truth. The issue of confessional membership remains a serious obstacle between “normalizing” relations with the OPC, and ought to remain so as long as the OPC continues to tolerate members who condemn and/or neglect the baptism of their children, (e)

Does this stance not reflect a lack of love, pastoral concern and compassion toward those “who cannot... in good conscience present their children for baptism?” Dr. Van Dam, in “Church Membership and Baptism” (Clarion, May 5, 1995), suggests that such is indeed the case. He even talks about Biblical principles referred to by the Synod of The Hague (1914) which “are more compassionate and pastoral than the position of Br. Chase.”

We must therefore also examine Dr. Van Dam’s assertion “with mutual kindness and respect.” We will do that, the Lord willing, in one of our future editorials.

**Ron Dykstra**

- a) Mrs. Stephen Brown, Letters to the Editor, Clarion, March 24, 1995.
- b) CCOPC and CEIR, Progress Report, February 27, 1990.
- c) Rev. Cl. Stam, “Denominationalism”, Clarion.
- d) Rev. J. Geertsema, “Once Again the OPC”, Clarion.
- e) Wayne H. Chase, Letter to the Editor, Clarion, April 21, 1995.

## ***PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH***

### **POLITY - the offices**

By A. Boersma (from Reformanda, November 29, 1995)

Translated by P. deBoer

The Presbyterians, like the Reformed, also recognize the three offices of minister, elder and deacon. The consistory (Kirk-Session) consists of the minister and the elders. They are collectively called the elder, and distinguished as “minister” and “ruling elders”. It is note-worthy that once a person is ordained as an elder, he remains one for the rest of his life.

Even when such a brother no longer is active in the office, he maintains the status of elder. We could compare it to emeritus ministers who no longer fulfill their active service in the congregation, of which they were office bearers, but who still continue to preach for the rest of their lives and continue to add to their years of service in the ministry.

The chairman of the consistory is the minister. He has the right to raise matters for the agenda and in case of a tie vote he will cast the deciding ballot. In the same manner he is also the chairman of the meetings of the deacons. The deacons are in charge of all the assets of the congregation. The care for the needy is in their charge, but also the financial concerns for and of the minister and custodian belongs to their task. The clerk of the consistory does not necessarily have to be an elder. And the minutes are only valid when they explicitly note that the meeting was begun and ended with prayer.

### **The Highly Placed Minister**

Even though all the members of the consistory are referred to as elders, the minister does occupy a particular place in their midst. He is, in matter of fact, not under the supervision of the consistory, but under the supervision of the presbytery.

As a result, the consistory may exercise discipline over everyone in the congregation and over the elders, but not over the minister. When counsel is of the opinion that the minister is not performing his task faithfully, the only course of action open to it is to send in a complaint to the presbytery.

It is the task of the minister to build up the spiritual health of everyone in every office and calling within his territory. The most important means in performing this task is the worship service. The minister is responsible to the presbytery for the manner in which he conducts the service. He also receives full access to the church building. The elders and deacons can only use the church building when they have received permission from the minister. Requests for use of the building for church or charitable events must be brought to the minister. However, if the church building is requested for a community or political event, then the college of deacons will decide.

In short, the pulpit belongs to the minister. He decides about all matters concerning it - who may use the building, etc. In the same way, pulpit exchange is not a concern for the consistory, but the minister will independently decide who will preach from his pulpit. This puts an interesting light on the questions about the variety of pulpit exchanges addressed to presbyterians. It is difficult to hold a local consistory responsible for a matter that is only the responsibility of the minister. If one has major concerns about the practice in a particular area, the only manner of dealing with it is to send a com-plaint to the presbytery. The local office bearers can exercise no influence in this matter.

### **“Interchurch” official work?**

We began this short look at Presbyterian Church polity with a look at church history. From there we learned that the presbyteries replaced bishops and superintendents. This continues to influence the position of the presbytery in relation to the local congregation. The minister performs the duties of his office upon instruction from the presbytery and is also responsible to report to them.

A worship service can also be arranged by a higher body. Further, when there is a shortage of elders their number can be supplemented from within the presbytery by the presbytery.

We read in the paper that a discussion has begun again about the office of a bishop (upon suggestions by synodically reformed Prof. Koffeman). Against such suggestions it is stated that the offices within the congregation may only function locally. Therefore the place of a bishop, whose official responsibilities would exceed the local congregation, does not fit in the church polity that wants to follow the confession of Art 31 of the Nederlandse Geloofs Belijdenis (The Belgic Confession) [J. P. deVries, “De Kerk heeft maar een Bisschop”, Nederlands Dagblad, November, 1995].

The same questions must be raised about Presbyterian Church polity. There too, the official responsibilities are established by a higher body: the presbytery exercises oversight and discipline over the minister and can takeover responsibilities which belong to the task of the local office bearers. It continues to be necessary to raise these matters of difference and to participate in

fundamental discussions about them within the context of the various contacts with presbyterians throughout the world. For the matter of church government is of extreme importance for the building up of the congregation of the Lord Christ, following the norms and directions that God's Word has given us.

### **SUMMARY- Press release of Classis Kelmscott, December 6, 1995**

The executive officers were: Rev. C. Bouwman, chairman; Br. D. Pot, vice chairman; Br. J. VanDongen, clerk.

“Classis then proceeds with the appointment of Rev. W. Huizinga and Rev. A. VanDelden as advisors to classis.”

After examination of the Rev. VanderJagt's ecclesiastical papers, a Colloquium Doctum was held.

“1. Rev. A. VanDelden leads a discussion on the Doctrine of Election and Free Will.

2. Rev. W. Huizinga engages a discussion centered around the doctrine of Scripture.

3. Rev. C. Bouwman discusses with Rev. W. VanderJagt some of the aspects related to the doctrine of the Church and Reformed Church Polity ...

The meeting concludes that Rev. W. VanderJagt's responses and comments to the questions indicate that he is faithful to Scripture and Confessions and wishes to be Reformed in the execution of his office as minister.”