

The 1996 Christian Reformed Synod

By John P. Galbraith

The 1996 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) was held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 11-19. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church was represented at the Synod by two fraternal delegates, the Rev. Douglas A. Felch and the Rev. John P. Galbraith.

The Synod was characterized by its usual free debate in an atmosphere of sharp differences, but devoid of acrimony. Several matters considered by the Synod were of special interest to members of the OPC.

Women Ruling Elders and Ministers

The 1995 Synod's decision to open the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist to women faced and continues to face widespread opposition in the CRC. However, by a margin of 122 to 54, the Synod voted to "not accede to the overtures which ask for a revision of the decision of Synod 1995 regarding women in office, but that Synod 1996 affirm the 1995 decision." Technically, the decision will be reviewed by the Synod in the year 2000.

The advisory committee had been divided sixteen to four on the recommendation. However, even the minority report recognized the 1995 decision as *a fait accompli*, and accepted the heart of the 1995 decision: "that Synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist," and that individual classes (presbyteries), "in response to local needs and circumstances," may declare "inoperative" the requirement of the Church Order that such officers be "male" and "ordain and install women" in these offices.

Later in the meeting three women were approved as candidates for the ministry and declared eligible for a call from the churches. Calls are expected to be issued to all three shortly.

Relations with the GKN

For a number of years, the CRC has had an ongoing discussion with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) about the latter's acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle as a valid Christian alternative. As a result, in 1983 the CRC suspended certain mutual privileges that belonged to the ecclesiastical relationship of the two churches.

This year, Synod determined to expand the restrictions on the relationship "for a minimum of two years": "exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies" and "in initiating joint action in areas of common responsibility." The CRC intends for discussion of the homosexual issue to continue through personal meetings of representatives of the two churches.

OPC-CRC Discussions

The interchurch Relations Committee of the CRC had recommended to the Synod that no discussions be permitted on matters already decided by the CRC. On the recommendation of the

advisory committee, however, the Synod decided that on such matters the CRC "is willing to discuss these positions in response to the OPC's requests," and that if the OPC should have study committees on such matters, the CRC would be "willing to serve in a consultative capacity" to such committees, thus keeping dialogue open between the two churches.

The OPC's Letter to the CRC

The OPC's General Assembly had, on its last day - two days after the opening of the CRC Synod - adopted a communication to that Synod. However, the lateness of the action made delivery of the letter to the Synod and action on it by the Synod awkward. It was carried by hand to the Synod the next day, but by that time the Synod's appropriate advisory committee had completed its work pertaining to the OPC. As a result, our fraternal delegates had no opportunity to discuss the letter with the advisory committee or the Synod.

The letter was of crucial importance to OPC-CRC relations. It informed the Synod that because we can no longer assume that the CRC is a church of "like practice" with the OPC; our General Assembly had decided to suspend several provisions of the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship between our two churches. Furthermore, that relationship would be terminated at the close of our 1997 General Assembly unless it should determine that other action is warranted.

According to the terms of the suspension, the CRC could no longer assume that the seating of their fraternal delegates ("corresponding members") at presbytery meetings would be automatic. (That is, a presbytery would not seat a female ruling elder or minister from the CRC.) Also, "occasional pulpit fellowship" is discontinued except at the discretion of individual sessions. Finally, "intercommunion" for the purposes of the reception, removal, and erasure of members can no longer be assumed.

After several days, copies of the OPC's letter were distributed to the members of the Synod, but it took no action with regard to the letter.

Conclusion

The Synod was both discouraging and encouraging to this reporter. It was discouraging that the previous decision on women in office was confirmed, if only for a minimum of four years, and that a significant barrier has been erected between us. It was encouraging that the CRC is taking a firm stand on the acceptance of homosexuality by the GKN.

The OPC needs to pray, not only for itself, but also for the CRC.

Taken, with permission, from New Horizons, August/September 1996

A Summer of Discontent

A third beginning! Just like the ending and beginning of a calendar year, the start of a new season brings with it reflection and projection. As we begin Volume Three of our endeavour we recall our uncertainty and hesitance when we began. We wrote, "We do not know what the future

of this endeavour will bring. We pray that the Lord will bless it and provide the strength and insight we will need." (Ref. Pol, Vol.1, No.1)

We gratefully acknowledge the blessings of our Lord. From a mere 30 addresses we have grown, in two years, to a mailing list of 325 in North America and 108 in Australia. Thus far we have received the strength to maintain our goal of a bi-weekly distribution. While judgment of the content of our efforts must be left to others, and eventually to Him for Whose glory it is all done.

"If someone cares about those who are going on ways of falsehood...he will wage a battle for their minds" we said when we began. It is in this same spirit that we take up our task again. Reformed Polemics are discussions about theological doctrines and practices in light of the Reformed faith. As there is increasing debate about matters that were considered settled and binding in the past, it becomes very necessary to maintain such a reformed direction. Whereas in the past we might have considered debating the finer points of theology to keep our minds sharpened, the present time forces us to defend positions many thought would never be questioned.

While many of us took a break from our regular activities others were hard at work. During late spring and early summer a number of theological meetings took place.

At the Synod of The Free Reformed Churches in Australia a decision was made to withdraw from the ICRC (International Conference of Reformed Churches). Membership in this organization has been a strongly debated issue among the brotherhood there. Two appeals concerning this membership were on the agenda of Synod Kelmscott. Rev. Huizinga, chairman of this Synod summarized the decision regarding the ICRC as follows: "Yet on one major issue we remained painfully divided...A number of proposals surfaced. We took the farthest reaching proposal first. It passed by the slimmest of majorities. It means our membership in the ICRC is terminated. Some who had conscientious objections to our membership agreed with this. Others who prized membership in the ICRC but lamented the ongoing divisions and the inability to convince each other sadly agreed. On the other side, some members are left demoralized...Still, the matter of the ICRC has disappeared. Will that bring unity and peace? In my mind, it might bring more peace but the underlying differences have not been resolved. In my view, unity on the question of relations with other churches will only come as a hard earned product." (Closing address at Synod 1996, from *Una Sancta*, Vol.43, No.19)

Undoubtedly the matter of the ICRC will not disappear from discussion. The underlying issue of a scriptural definition of the Church also affects other discussions and decisions. In Canada and in the Netherlands talks have been taking place for some time between Free Reformed / Christelijke Gereformeerden and the Canadian Reformed / Gereformeerde Vrijgemaakt federations.

The latest Synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches have established ecclesiastical fellowship with Presbyterian churches in Korea and Scotland. Numerous individuals as well as some consistories feel that at times compromises are made in these discussions and that the lack of impediments to such relationships are not sufficiently taught, explained, and discussed.

Unscriptural teachings in the Christian Reformed Church of North America have caused a number of developments in that federation as well. An increasing number of congregations have broken with it and become independent, affiliated as Orthodox Christian Reformed, or joined the Alliance which recently became the Fellowship of Uniting Reformed Churches. The recent CRC Synod did nothing to indicate that there is repentance and a turning back, but rather continued on

the erroneous course it was already on.

As a consequence the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, who also held their General Assembly this summer, notified the Christian Reformed that they would break with their relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship. (See article by John Galbraith elsewhere in this issue) The permission of women to the special offices has caused the OPC to take this action. Part of the letter sent by the General Assembly of the OPC to the Synod of the CRC reads: "You were faced with recent decisions of the synods of the GKN to allow conduct that in your judgment was contrary to the Scriptures and in conflict with the decisions of your own synod, with the observation that your own concerns and protests regarding these decisions had not moved the synod of the GKN to modify its position, and with a concern over the laxity within the GKN in dealing with ministers and other leaders who openly promoted views conflicting with the Reformed confession.

Today we find ourselves in a similar situation with respect to the decisions of your 1995 Synod, and we confess, brothers, we find it every bit as distasteful as you did in 1993. But we promised, and with this letter are keeping that commitment, to engage in 'the exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting the fundamentals of Christian unity.'"

Readers may remember that this matter of the OPC relationship with the Christian Reformed was (according to Synod Abbotsford) the only item hindering full ecclesiastical relationship between the OPC and the Canadian Reformed Churches.

A concerned Christian might easily become saddened by all the difficulties that exist in federations that all seek to abide by God's holy Word. At the same time a student of the various major assemblies might also be heartened by the orthodox positions taken in a number of disputes. The Free Reformed Synod broke relations with a group led by a former Christian Reformed minister, Harold Camping of Family Radio. The chairman of that synod, Rev. Pieter VanderMeyden said, "When it became clear that their development became impervious to correction because of their changes of the creeds we felt we had to cut off contact."

A classis of the Reformed Church of America recently called countered the teachings of Rev. Richard Rhem, senior pastor of the 2800 member Christ Community Church of Spring Lake, because his teachings called into question the definitive authority of scripture and salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

In the Presbytery of the Midwest the OPC has charged a certain Dr. Terry Gray with committing the public sin of stating that Adam had primate ancestors - contrary to the Word of God and the doctrinal standards of the OPC, and also that with regard to the process and method by which God created Adam, Dr. Gray subordinates Scripture to alleged empirical evidence.

The latest synod of the CRC intensified the restrictions it had already placed on its relationship with the GKN due to their continuance of permitting homosexuality among its members in good standing.

More incidences and occurrences could be cited, but it becomes very apparent that there is much food for thought in this year of our Lord 1996/1997. Which direction must the people of God, the members of the church, pursue? Must they seek unity in spite of many differences (either real or perceived)? Is there perhaps room for quasi church organizations like the ICRC or the ARCH as an intermediate stage? Or must they maintain a strict adherence to the doctrines refined

through history, struggles, liberations and secessions?

[For those who have not read about ARCH yet, it is a proposal by Dr. James Visscher, minister of the Canadian Reformed Church of Langley to form an association of four federations (Can. Ref., Free Ref., Orthodox Ref., and the Fellowship of Uniting Ref. Churches). Details of this proposal can be found in Christian Renewal of August 1996 and likely in Clarion very soon.]

All in all there is much to discuss. We are humbled by the ordinance of God's infallible Word that desires all of His people to be one. And we are constrained in our desire to achieve such unity by the command not to compromise the teachings of that very same Word. In the end we can only go on our knees in prayer and supplication for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we continue to do our tasks in obedience.

PdB

The following article is a speech by Rev. M. J. C. Blok, who has been minister of the Church in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. The speech was held on September 7, 1995 in commemoration of the Liberation, which occurred on May 27, 1945. This is a matter of continued importance, particularly for the youth of the Church. The meaning of the Liberation becomes particularly clear for them in this speech. The article, taken from Reformanda, maintains the character of the speech.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE LIBERATION FOR US TODAY?

That is the title of my story for tonight. I have been asked to place a connection between the Liberation, the Open Letter Question, and 1995. I was also asked if my speech could be particularly directed at the youth. Tonight we look back. Tonight we also look above.

The question is: What do we gain by looking backwards tonight? Are there lessons to be learned from the past? What must the next generation know? And what must they, in turn, pass on to their children? (Psalm 78)

Or do we look upon the church conflicts of 1945 and 1967 as unhappy ballast? Must we try to forget them as soon as possible or will we thankfully remember them? May there be thanks to God for church preservation?

We'll do three things this evening: remember the forties, thereafter the sixties, and finally dwell on the nineties.

1. The Conflict of the Forties

I will commence with a letter of August 18, 1944 from the concerned in Apeldoorn to their consistory. In that letter the consistory is admonished for wanting to withdraw themselves from the issues that are alive in the Church at that time. The consistory had declared that it was 'not competent' to properly judge about the matters of 'covenant and baptism'. To this the concerned reacted by pointing out "that you have been called to give leadership to the congregation". They also protested that Classis Apeldoorn had, on technical grounds, not dealt with an appeal they had sent. So the complaint was that consistory and classis refused to do what was right. Truth was

opposed.

In these appeals they were alluding to the suspension of K. Schilder and S. Greijdanus. Consistory and Classis did not follow the way of faithful obedience. Instead they submitted themselves to the decisions of Synod, but not to God's Word.

Intermezzo

The synodical doctrine concerning baptism, the teaching that one could not be certain that God was really serious about a baptized member, had to be obeyed. One could not be sure that God truly loved you if you were baptized. If, later in life, you broke with God, your baptism couldn't have been real. Then you had never been in the covenant. Then the water of baptism would have been spilled.

Synod said: you may consider a baptized member as born again, you may consider such as a real child of God, until the opposite becomes apparent as they grow up. In each real baptism a point was made of the essence of faith in the believer.

The concerned reached out to God's Word alone: "Does God love us as baptized members or not?" We won't speculate about the ability of a child to believe. We won't speculate about election (the hidden things...). We won't speculate about regeneration in young children.

The so-called Declaration of Opinions by the concerned in 1943 puts it this way: God's Word directs us to 'leave the hidden things for Him, but accept for ourselves and our children His expressed promises and demands, His promise of blessing, together with His announcement of the covenant wrath, His warnings and His threats.' Therefore, in your baptism you recognize: God loves us! We note the promise of God and we note that there are things He has kept to Himself...

During the times of the Liberation people repeatedly pointed to Deuteronomy 29:29: 'The secret things belong to the Lord, our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.' In the time of the Liberation people emphasized what had been revealed: God loves us. There is a promise of salvation for our children. And that promise is always connected with the demand to accept it in true faith. That 'accepting' is the work of the Holy Spirit and a fruit of election. It is also revealed that those who do not accept this promise "will receive, as covenant breakers, a heavier judgment" (Declaration of Opinions).

In reaction to the Declaration of Opinions General Synod stated: in our churches nothing may be taught that is not in agreement with the related doctrinal statements of synod. Unfortunately, synod did not deal with the content of the Declaration of Opinions. Self-made theological constructions were considered above God's Word.

God's Word is trustworthy in both blessing and curse. The promise is trustworthy, and that promise, according to the concerned, is connected to the call to faith and repentance.

Once Again: the Letter of August 18, 1944

The concerned pointed out to the consistory the aforementioned unscriptural teaching concerning baptism, as well as the violation of the Church Order and the hierarchical approach of synod. Synod had not listened to the scriptural objections of Schilder and Greijdanus, but rather persecuted these brothers and thrown them out. It was during this time, August 3, 1944 that K. Schilder was deposed. He was placed outside of the Church. And, the letter explains, by this act,

ALL the concerned were in fact placed outside of the Church.

You can feel the tensions mount; and all that in a time of hunger, raid, war, and poverty. All that while two-thirds of the churches had asked synod not to deal with these matters at this time.

The concerned considered the acts of discipline against Schilder and Greijdanus ungrounded; they denied the synodical doctrine of baptism and the required submission to synodical decisions.

The concerned urged the consistory to free themselves from the decisions of synod because they are a "contra - and anti - Christian yoke".

In upright humility the concerned confessed their own sins and loosed themselves from the church-destroying decisions of the synod.

The concerned are saddened by the fact that so few church members in Apeldoorn are aware of the fundamental issues at stake. They desire that these members be properly informed and indicate that Rev. B. Holwerda from Amersfoort is willing to come and inform the members. They ask: "May such a meeting take place in our own Westerkerk?"

There is still more in this interesting letter, but we'll leave it at this.

It is remarkable to note the hesitancy of the consistory. The dogmatic and church political issues were "held-over" until the consistory itself could establish a position. The consistory was divided. Undoubtedly the war circumstances played a role in this. Many had "neither shoes nor any form of wheeled transportation". Heating in the church building was problematic. There was a shortage of paper. In several places in Apeldoorn people were being shot down. Typhoid and dysentery also appeared.

In February 1945 (a half year after the reading of the Act of Liberation or Return on Aug.11, 1944 in the Lutheran Church in Den Hague) the consistory still had not determined a position regarding the issues. When, at last in May 1945 (the month of the liberation of our country), the members of the consistory receive a report from the local minister, Rev. Timmer, it completely follows the line of the synod. The uncertainty of many months changes into assuredness - assuredness in following the synod. It is not surprising that as a result the Act of Liberation or Return was signed in Apeldoorn on May 15, 1945.

One of the conclusions drawn from this story may be that in Apeldoorn things were not done too hastily.

Our talk has left aside the human emotions in this drama. But be assured that there was much distress on both sides: among the concerned as well as those who followed the direction of the synod.

[to be continued in next issue, ed.]