

CONFESSIONAL OR CONFUSED

On Being Reformed Today

In the course of our “open and public” discussion about “Being Reformed Today,” (a) we made a number of sober observations, and formulated some hopefully beneficial and “constructive” conclusions. We concluded that “to be Reformed means to be Biblical... Being Reformed is not a matter of preference, but it is a matter of the truth of God’s Word, and of His honour and glory...” We also stated, in response to comments about the dangers of confessionalism and anti-confessionalism, that “it is certainly not ‘confessionalism’ that is currently our first and foremost concern.” Those who are now withdrawing themselves from the local Can. Ref. Churches do so because they want little or nothing to do with the Reformed confession of Scripture. They unfortunately don’t know (anymore) what it means to be either Reformed or confessional. This spiritual apathy or confessional indifference inevitably leads to chronic uncertainty with regard to the unchangeable truths. Instead of true conviction and “wholehearted” confession we encounter inescapable doubt and constant confusion; rather than ongoing reformation we are confronted with continuing deformation.

NOT DOCTRINE BUT LIFE

These developments bring to mind the words of Rev. J. E. Vonkenberg who, at the League Day in 1922 in Haarlem, spoke openly about “deformation and falling away.” He declared: “You already know the tune well, even if you are hearing variations on it. ‘Not doctrine, but life.’ That’s the basic motif. And then come the variations: Not the confession but your walk of life. Not the form but the spirit...” (b), or as we hear nowadays: “No creed but Christ... Doctrine divides, service unites... Not form but spirit, not confession but experience.”

In our Canadian Reformed community we are, of course, a bit more cautious and discreet. The aforementioned slogans are just a little too blatant or unrefined for our Reformed disposition. Yet we have our own “variations” on “the basic motif” which are not all that far removed or indistinguishable from the well-known “tune” about which Rev. Vonkenberg spoke; variations which are at times far more subtle, but equally subversive. In our article in the September 12th issue (c) we already encountered one such variation: “Confessional membership is both unbiblical and unrealistic.” There are, of course, many more variations: “The confessions are only the work of men... It is questionable whether every believer must, or is even able to give allegiance to all the formulations used in the confessions in order to be admitted to the sacraments... Let us honestly examine the confessions critically to see whether they are indeed Biblical, and affirm them insofar as they are... Let us not bind ourselves or each other to anything beyond Scripture,” etc., etc.

These kinds of statements are often made by the very people who truly want to be Reformed, and who fervently desire “reformation” in the church. Yet, as we also noted, they fail to ask, “What is reformation?,” and therefore they overlook the fact that “reformation is - return to the confessions” (K Schilder). We will therefore, in our “open and public discussion,” return to the confessions by way of continuing our excursion through J. Munneke’s “Het Historisch Fundament” (The Church and the Confession). (d) In the process we’ll take a look at a few of the “variations” on “the basic motif” which Munneke mentions, and which are also vocalized by those who currently want little

or nothing to do with the confessions. These “variations” are explicit examples of statements, expressions or ideas that have become trite, commonplace, stale, and overused. In the context of our discussion about the Reformed confession of Scripture, these variations are not only trite or stale, but also deceptive and destructive; unscriptural and un-Reformed; anti-confessionalistic and confusing. In some instances they are perfect examples of how, in the minds of some people, truth and falsehood can blend into one.

THE CONFESSION IS ONLY THE WORK OF MEN

“It has often been said that ‘the confession is only the work of men and as such infinitely inferior to the inspired Word.’ In this way a wedge is driven between the Divine Word and the repeated word of the confession. That the confession is the work of men and the Bible the Divinely inspired Word goes without saying. The confession itself, however, does not want anything to do with that faulty antithesis. It does not place itself above but precisely under the Scriptures, as it is expressed in B.C. art. 7: ‘It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures... We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the divine Scriptures...’

Yet Jacobus Trigland, who fought against Arminianism, denied the charge the confession is only a human document. In his ‘Ecclesiastical History’ (1650) he wrote: ‘One must not consider the Belgic Confession as simply a human document, but as the writings of God-fearing and faithful teachers of the true Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is taken from the Word of God to serve as a sound and scriptural confession of faith; it was confessed by the faithful martyrs... it was recognized by the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands and France as being sound and in conformity with God’s Word and as such was used against papists and all kinds of sects; it was defended boldly and intellectually against all dissidents; and by it the Reformed Churches were separated from all kinds of sects. That is more than simply the writings of men.’” (e)

In conformity with God’s Word! A beautiful expression! The confession has already been called “the repeated Word,” “a repetition of the Holy Scriptures,” and “the ‘amen’ of the Church to the Word.” That is indeed more than simply the work of men.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CONFESSIONS

In one of our previous “open and public discussions” (f) we dealt with the significance of the confession: the important function it fulfills in the preservation of the Church. We also stated that the confession takes its authority from Scripture because it does not want to be anything but an interpretation of Scripture, in conformity with the Word of God. When we now again deal with the authority of the confession, we note that also here we encounter a number of “variations” on “the basic motif” which in various ways challenge this authority: “Only the office bearers (need to) subscribe... Let us not bind ourselves or each other to anything beyond Scripture... Let us honestly examine the confession critically to see whether they are indeed Biblical, and affirm them insofar as they are.”

As we have seen, the Church is quite clear about the authority of the confessions. “For this reason,” says Munneke, “the office bearers of the Church have to subscribe to The Three Forms of Unity, and if they refuse to do so, they are by that fact suspended and ultimately they will be

dismissed. This is not confessionalism, nor an over estimation of the confession. Calvinists never put the confession on a par with the inspired Word of God.” (g)

In the confessions we read God’s truth, as He has revealed it in His Word; the truth that the Church has absorbed, reflected, processed, and in her own words expressed against heresies. In her own words she repeats Scripture. This is derivative authority only, but says Munneke, “precisely therein lies the confession’s greatest strength. It witnesses; ‘So say the Scriptures; it is written!’

When the Church no longer says ‘thus says the Lord,’ and no longer binds office bearers and all church members to what it has confessed, then the Church is finished as a pillar and certainty (bulwark, RD) of the truth. For that reason the Church must maintain the authority of the confession for the sake of her life.” (h)

INTERPRETATION OF THE CONFESSION

There are a number of pernicious “variations” on “the basic motif” of “not doctrine but life” which we could mention here, namely: “The confessions have had their time... We think differently today... There is more than one explanation... We don’t all need to think alike.” Munneke writes: “In all possible ways people have been trying to get out from under the authority of the confession. One of these ways has been the interpretation, the exegesis (explanation, RD) of the confession.

Nowadays it is generally argued that the confessions have had their time. They are historic documents and as such bound to time. Today we formulate many things differently and there are many doctrines about which people think differently today. The authors (of the confession, RD) were well intentioned, and the confession has its merits, but it is out of step with modern theology. Today the basic formula: ‘Jesus is Lord’ is sufficient.

The confessions, however, are not historical documents only. The confessions must be read and explained in the light of the author’s intentions, not in accordance with the theology of those days, but in accordance with, and in the sense of Scripture. If one no longer reads the confession in the Scriptural sense, but interprets it as one pleases, it becomes extremely dangerous. Then one reads too easily one’s own thoughts into the confession. The confession is then explained in such a way that it conforms to one’s own opinions. So the Synodical Churches divided the B.C. Art. 27-29, into two parts. Article 27 deals with the invisible Church, and Article 29 with the visible Church. In doing so the correct view of the Church was lost.

As result it went from bad to worse. The synodical churches still have the confessions, but in practice they are no longer bound to it. History has shown that through historical or scientific interpretation of the confession, God’s people have been robbed of the teachings of Scriptures. Therefore, there is no other interpretation of the confessions, than that of the Word of God.” (i)

PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH

Munneke mentions one more “variation” on “the basic motif” related to the question in the Form for Public Profession of Faith. This “variation” is: “Only the Apostles Creed!” Munneke writes: “The form for the public profession of faith (the Dutch form, RD) contains the following question: ‘Do you acknowledge the doctrine which is contained in the Old and New Testament and in the articles of the Christian faith and which are taught here in this Christian Church, to be the true and

complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession in life and death?

It has been said more than once in the recent past that by ‘the articles of the Christian faith’ the ‘Apostles Creed’ is meant, and that one does not bind oneself to The Three Forms of Unity at the profession of faith. The phrase following ‘taught here in this Christian Church,’ however, makes it clear that our fathers intended the articles of the Christian faith to mean The Three Forms of Unity for they are taught here in the Christian Church. Evidence for this is found in the form for public profession used in the church at Batavia (1621) where the confessor promises ‘to acknowledge all the doctrines of God’s Word and the Christian reformed religion briefly explained in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.’” (j)

CONCLUSION

In examining some of Munneke’s examples of “variations” on “the basic motif” of “not doctrine but life,” it may indeed leave the impression that we are “people who only major in the negatives” and who can “only disturb and polarize.” However, when there are “among us” those who want “little or nothing to do with the confessions,” and who through their unscriptural and un-Reformed “variations” convey their anti-confessionalistic sentiments, then we must speak up.

We may not remain silent when we hear “variations” which are at variance with the divinely inspired Scriptures and at odds with the Reformed confessions, for it is simply impossible to be and remain “Reformed, biblically based believers” when there is chronic uncertainty about what we believe and confess, and constant confusion with regard to the unchangeable truths. We must therefore continually exert ourselves to “unmask the lie” (Dr. J. C. de Moor), and thereby show our sincere desire to “build up the church and to promote the kingdom of God.”

Ron Dykstra

(a) Being Reformed Today, Rev. J. Visscher, Information, June 27/98, and Clarion, Sept. 18/98.

(b) Schilder’s Struggle for the Unity of the Church, Rudolf Van Reest. (p.64)

© To Be or Not To Be, Reformed Polemics, Sept. 12/98.

(d) (e) (g) (h) (i) (j) Het Historisch Fundament, (The Church and the Confession), J Munneke, Diaconia, June 1989.

(f) Confessional and Constructive, Reformed Polemics, Oct 10/98.

GOD’S LAW ON MURDER/ MANSLAUGHTER

Exod. 21:12-14 “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him treacherously, you shall take him from my altar that he may die.”

The provision of a place of asylum for one guilty of manslaughter was unique in the ancient world. The existences of places of asylum per se were commonplace. These were mostly holy places, e.g., temples. In Israel it was also permissible to flee to the temple - that much is clear from v.14 where it is stated that a murderer may be taken away from the altar (implying that one who committed manslaughter was safe there, cf. 1 Kings 1:50ff; 2:28ff; Ps. 27:5). And this is what is unique in

God's law for His people. For in the ancient world (even in the time of the New Testament), someone who had fled to a place of asylum was always safe no matter what he had done. God makes an important distinction between murder and manslaughter - a distinction unknown in the rest of the ancient world. If you killed a man, it didn't matter whether the death was intentional or not, the same punishment applied. The fact that we take the distinction between manslaughter and murder for granted has to do with the fact that we have been brought up in a civilization heavily influenced by God's laws.

It may surprise us, however, to learn that God makes the distinction between murder and manslaughter in a slightly different way than many modern nations. It is clear from this law that anyone who intentionally kills another person (i.e. in an illegal manner) is guilty of murder and warrants the death penalty. But how does God define manslaughter (killing without intent)? The text speaks of someone who did not lie in wait for the other person, but God let him fall into his hand. In Num. 35:22-24 a couple of examples are given:

“But if he stabbed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait, or used a stone, by which a man may die, and without seeing him cast it upon him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy, and did not seek his harm; then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these ordinances;” In such cases the person is cleared of a murder-charge. He may stay in a city of refuge. Manslaughter is, however, here defined in terms of no intent to harm and not no intent to kill. This is clear from the preceding verses defining murder: And if he pushed him of hatred, or threw something at him lying in wait and as a result he died, or if he struck him down with his hand in enmity, and as a result he died, the one who struck him shall surely be put to death, he is a murderer; the blood avenger shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.

Murder is the killing of a person as a result of premeditated intent to harm. It may not have been one's intent to actually kill the person, but if he dies, then one must pay the penalty, an irrevocable death sentence. This means that if you accidentally kill a person, then the only thing the prosecution needs to prove is intent to harm. If you demonstrably hated the person, you could end up in a tight spot.

It is against this background that the Lord Jesus states that feelings of hate towards one's neighbour are in God's eyes tantamount to murder.

“You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’

But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matt. 5:21-22)

If it was clear that you had killed someone, then evidence that you called him names in hatred may have been enough to convict you of murder in certain circumstances. Jesus states that this in itself is sufficient to warrant God's punishment for God is interested in the state of the human heart. Here in God's law, murder is defined in terms of the tragic results of feelings of enmity.

If enmity or intent to harm cannot be proven, then the person who caused the death could flee to a city of refuge. The idea of such areas of asylum is strange to the modern Western mind. And yet we ought to realize that such places of asylum existed in Europe right up until the time of the Reformation, when they were generally abolished.

The biblical system of cities of refuge is worked out in more detail in Num. 35:9-34; Deut. 4:41-43; 19:1-13 and Josh. 20:1-9. It is only hinted at here in Exod. 21 and the suggestion is made that at least God's sanctuary may function as such a place of asylum. (The law suggests that this was probably already current practice). The system of cities of refuge was to work as follows: If you had accidentally killed someone, or even if you had committed a murder and yet because of the circumstances wanted a judicial trial, you were to flee to a city of refuge. Six such cities were to be provided in the various regions of Israel. These were Levitical cities and thus places where there was no question of land being bound to any particular family. This was important, because if the judges found that the death was indeed caused by accident, then you would be given a place to live in the city. Here you would have to remain until the death of the high priest. In a Levitical city, a house could be given away without the complications of property rights which would revert in the year of Jubilee (cf. Lev. 25:10).

If, however, you fled to such a city for refuge, the elders of that city had to first ascertain that your application was genuine (Josh. 20:4). They would be concerned to avoid having to supply lodging to anyone who happened by. After you were admitted to the city, you would have to await the outcome of a judicial inquiry. In Deut. 19 we learn that it was the task of elders in the region where the killing occurred to investigate the matter. If murder was proved (on the basis of at least two witnesses), you would be removed from the city of refuge and given over to the blood-avenger whose task it was to apply the death penalty.

This system which the Lord appointed was, as mentioned above, quite different from that common in the ancient world. Firstly, outside of Israel no one was given lodging if he fled to a recognized place of refuge/ asylum. You would have to find your own place to stay. Secondly, if you reached a place of asylum in the ancient world you were guaranteed safety for as long as you remained there. No judicial process could extract you from that place - even if it was proven that you were guilty of the most horrendous crimes. Anyone could flee to such a place of asylum, no matter what crime he had committed. This will have meant that such cities (outside of Israel) in the ancient world could easily become societies of criminals. Anyone scared of the consequences of his crimes could flee there and be safe. During the Roman Imperium the evils of this system were generally known and often discussed in the Senate at Rome. But they could do little to change the situation. What we don't often realize is the fact that the great city of Ephesus, where Paul worked for two years at preaching the Gospel, was such a place of asylum - a refuge for all manner of criminals!

God's law regulated matters differently in Israel. Firstly, cities of refuge were only to provide refuge for those who had committed manslaughter (without intent to harm). Secondly, if the court of elders found that the accused was guilty of murder, he had to be removed to receive his punishment.

The system of cities of refuge remained in the civilized world, even after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. God's law also spoke of such cities. At that time the six Levitical cities had all

disappeared. In Christian lands, churches were declared to be places of refuge. Most churches in these times owned considerable tracts of land where applicants for refuge could be put to work. But in the course of time this system began to be seriously misused. It was not propagated according to the rules of God's law, but according to what had been the practice in the former Roman Empire. Known criminals were protected by the church from any legal proceedings against them. It was because of this misuse that the principle of using churches as places of refuge was abandoned in the time of the Protestant Reformation. We may ask whether it may not have been better to keep the principle of places of refuge, but to cleanse it of the unbiblical way in which it was maintained.

One question remains: Why was it necessary to live in a city of refuge if you had killed someone by accident? Is this not a serious breach of one's personal freedom? To understand this, we need to pay some attention to the institution of the blood-avenger.

We ought to realize at the outset that the biblical institution of the blood-avenger had nothing to do with vigilante justice. In the first place, the word itself is not very accurately translated for the biblical expression literally means "redeemer of blood". Spilt blood has to be atoned for, and that is the concern of God's law. We read in Num. 35:33...

"You shall not thus pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of him who shed it."

God's law is not concerned about the personal vengeance of a particular family, but about the setting right of a violent crime which desecrates the land - a land wherein God Himself has chosen to live. That spilt blood cries out to the Lord was already clear as far back as Gen. 4:10 where God said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." God put it to Noah in these terms: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." (Gen. 9:6)

Spilt blood cries out to be atoned, and this is the task of the blood-redeemer. He must mete out the appropriate penalty for this crime and thus render justice. He must concern himself with God's justice, not private retribution for his family. God appoints as the blood-redeemer, the closest adult male in the family of the deceased. This man must carry out the death sentence in the case of murder, or, in the case of accidental manslaughter, ensure that the guilty party remains in the city of refuge. Even in the case of manslaughter, blood has been shed. The person who has done this is not always completely free of guilt, even if it was just carelessness. He does not have to pay with his life if he moves to a city of refuge. There, he may await the death of the high priest, whose own death will work the necessary atonement to enable him to return to his own land.

We ought to note that the blood-redeemer was not free to choose to let a murderer off the hook. He received a task from the Lord to avenge the spilling of blood. Only by executing the death penalty - after a judicial process - could the anger of God be mollified. The blood-redeemer was not to go hunting after a murderer by himself. He had to await the outcome of the judicial inquiry conducted by the elders of the region where the murder had occurred (Deut. 19). They would hand over the guilty party for execution. He may, of course, organize a search for someone suspected of the crime in order to put him on trial as the accused. But he was not to single-handedly try or execute anyone.

Finally, we ought not to think that the idea that murder desecrates the land is purely an Old Testament concept. In Rev. 6 we read of those who had been martyred for the faith. Their souls cry out to the Lord in prayer from under the heavenly altar...

How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

The blood of murder still cries to the Lord for (judicial) vengeance. This is something that we may - and even must - pray to God for. In modern Western society with its countless abortions, the church ought regularly to implore God to avenge the spilt blood in the land. We ought not to be afraid to sing prayers in the psalms crying out to the "God of vengeance" (e.g., Ps. 94).

Dr. R. D. Anderson

Press Release for immediate publication

Church Unity Discussions: Canadian Reformed, United Reformed

On Monday, September 21st, the Rev. R. Stienstra, P. Vellenga and J.A Bouwers, representatives of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the URCNA, met for the next in the series of meetings with the Committee for the promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity of the CanRCs, Dr. J. DeJong, Rev. W. den Hollander, and br. F. Westrik, at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton.

Once again, a good spirit of brotherly appreciation was enjoyed and we could speak openly about our hopes and desires in light of our Saviour's command that we should be one. We were also able to continue to speak frankly about perceived differences that might stand in the way of any such developments. Further, we mutually agreed that while these matters and perceptions must be addressed, this discussion should take place within a context in which our focus is on all that unites us.

Together we agreed that for the way forward we would use as our agenda the (URCNA) proposed guidelines for pursuing Church Unity. These guidelines speak of pursuing unity in three phases, namely a corresponding Relations Phase, an Ecclesiastical Fellowship Phase, leading to the final phase, the goal, Church Union. The URCNA committee will present to its Synod of June 1999 the recommendation officially to establish Corresponding Relations with the Canadian Reformed Churches. That would bring us officially into a time of exploration, (even though a lot of the exploratory work is going on already now).

As committees we've already determined together that as federations we share the same commitment to the Scriptures, the Creeds and Confessions, as well as to the Form of Subscription. The actual faithful adherence to this commitment in our respective federations was one of the topics of discussion in this particular meeting. With thankfulness we could observe that we share the unity of faith on this solid basis not only in word but also in deed. More detailed consideration of our respective histories and church orders etc. will keep us busy for the next little while as

committees. To facilitate a thorough discussion on matters of history, theology, and ecclesiology in our next meeting (the Lord willing, on November 16th) each of the committees has agreed to prepare papers on these matters.

As joint committees we've also spoken of our hopes that with everything going well we will try to recommend entering into the next phase by the year 2001, so that we could, the Lord willing, work towards full union by the year 2004. To be sure, we can't prejudge how the Lord will work with us in His providence, however, with such a "plan of union" we not only protect ourselves from the danger of acting too hastily, but, at the same time, we also show one another that we are serious about our commitment to act in obedience to our Saviour's directives. In fact, it was the expectation of the Canadian Reformed brothers at our meeting that with such a commitment, some of the earlier hesitancy to opening the pulpits to one another could be removed at a much earlier point in the process. This kind of accommodation gives wonderful evidence of a cooperative spirit that we need to continue to pray for, that we might see continued progress to the glory of our common God and Saviour. Let us then pray and work to this end at the level of our local congregations as well as in our personal relationships.

For the meeting, Rev. John A. Bouwers, William den Hollander.

On the lighter side...

How's your Chicken Soup?

We live in an age of instant analysis (witness the daily news), instant remedies (take a look at your drugstore shelves) and instant advice on just about every topic under the sun (see the bookstore shelves). It's in the latter category that my attention was focussed recently on the ever popular Chicken Soup for the Soul series. If you've been in any mainline bookstores or have walked past the magazine and book kiosks in busy airports, you'll know what I'm talking about.

One of the more recent entries in this series is Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul, subtitled '101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit'. It features quotes from various popular Christian authors and stories from many different people that are meant to inspire us and put a smile on our lips or a tear in our eye. Sprinkled among the stories are cute cartoons that are meant to make a point for those who'd rather not read all the stories (most of which only take up one or two pages).

This kind of book is only one of many such 'inspirational' books on the market today. What is their appeal and why do they resonate with so many people? First of all they are examples of clever marketing which address another modern malaise: the fact that the message has to be short, clever, and easily digested. A kind of fast food for the soul! Witness also the parallel development of a Bible designed to appeal particularly to every sub-category in the population.

Chicken soup has long been considered a folk remedy. If you're not feeling well, have a cold or something, it's recommended that you eat some chicken soup. Of course, there are different kinds of soup - some are watery, others are more hearty and satisfying. Nevertheless, the effect only lasts so long.

The same could be said for this book - nice stories (many appealing to the innate goodness of man or playing on our emotions) that make you feel good for a while but soon wear off.

I don't know how popular these are in our communities but wonder if we really need these types of books in order to satisfy our hunger for spiritual nourishment. Isn't the Word, faithfully proclaimed from week to week and ingested in sizable 'chunks', enough for us?

I think so, but go ahead and continue to eat chicken soup (or any other kind of soup) with your buns to take care of your bodily nourishment (as is a custom with many). Continue to rely upon the wellspring of the Scriptures for your spiritual renewal, however.

H. J. Ludwig.