

## **THE SUBSCRIPTION DEBATE** <sup>(4)</sup>

### ***Is the OPC a Confessional Church?***

In the current volume of Reformed Polemics we have spent quite a bit of time on confessional subscription or confessional binding. In terms of the Reformed perspective on subscription to the confessional standards of the church we have dealt with some of the reoccurring manifestations of confessional indifference such as the suggestion that we subscribe to “only the Apostle’s Creed” or that subscription is “for office-bearers only.” We have examined the erroneous statement that we subscribe to our confessions INsofar as they are scriptural rather than BECAUSE they are scriptural. In the context of confessional subscription we have given some thought to the devious and destructive practice of creating false dilemmas and faulty distinctions such as doctrinal versus peripheral; major versus minor; fundamental versus non-fundamental; important versus unimportant, etc., etc. There seems to be no end to all the possible ways in which people have been trying to get out from under the authority of the confession.

In response to all this trivializing and minimizing of the confession we have maintained the Reformed norm of “confessional membership” or confessional binding, namely, full or strict (maximal) subscription by ALL communicant church members to ALL of our Reformed confession of Scripture. We ALL wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God as the church has summarized it in the confessions and as it is taught in the Christian Church. We therefore willingly bind ourselves to our Reformed confession(s) in order to be fully bound to the truth of Scripture. We ALL believe and we ALL confess that truth. We are a confessing or confessional Church.

In our review of Presbyterian practices with regard to confessional subscription we have touched on “strict” versus “loose subscription,” subscribing to the “system of (Christian) doctrine” contained in the confessions, the “system of doctrine” as found in the ordination vow, subscribing with scruples or reservations, subscription for officers only. And, not unlike the situation in the Reformed realm, we are confronted here with the practice of subscribing to the confessional standards of the church “inasmuch” (“insofar” or “to the extent”) that they are scriptural. Moreover, in the context of confessional subscription we continually encounter such dubious and disastrous distinctions as “EXTRA-ESSENTIAL and not necessary points of doctrine,” and “articles NOT ESSENTIAL and NECESSARY in doctrine, worship, or government.” This “loose” language makes full and strict subscription to the confessional standards of the church simply impossible. Full or strict subscription cannot function in an environment of confessional carelessness (indifference) and linguistic ambiguity.

### ***SOME OBSERVATIONS***

When we reflect on all that we have learnt about confessional subscription we note that doctrinal carelessness and confessional indifference knows no federational or denominational boundaries. Not so long ago a number of church members (including a minister and former elders) withdrew themselves from the Can. Ref. Churches because they no longer wanted to bind themselves to or be bound by the Reformed confession of Scripture. This sad reality clearly shows that “crossed

fingers” and “broken vows,” (Gary North) are not solely a Presbyterian phenomenon, nor is an on-going struggle against “lax” or “loose subscription” only a Presbyterian peculiarity.

Nevertheless, the fact that the members who withdrew themselves from the Can Ref. Churches did so because they realized that such an anti-confessional stance would as yet not be condoned or tolerated in our Reformed federation of churches clearly shows that the requirement of wholehearted subscription by ALL communicant members is still the prevailing practice in our Reformed churches. “Confessional membership,” confessional binding or full (maximal) and strict subscription is the norm. Such is not the case in Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism.

In terms of the requirement of full or strict subscription, Gary North in his book “Crossed Finger,” writes that “Protestant Christianity refuses to follow the logic of strict subscription and affirmation. Very few churches require a voting (communicant, RD) member to do anything more than swear allegiance to a minimal statement of faith, perhaps a short historic creed. Presbyterianism, which requires its officers to affirm their acceptance of the most detailed theological confession in what used to be called Christendom, has almost no denominational-wide confessional requirement for voting members. To receive baptism, he is constitutionally required to affirm only that he believes in Christ and will obey him... This is the only Church oath mentioned in the Constitutional documents of Presbyterianism... This has been the weakness of Presbyterianism. Presbyterianism built a structure of Church government on something other than binding covenantal oaths, their stipulations, and precise negative sanctions. (a)

### ***COMING TO SOME CONCLUSIONS***

1) We note that Presbyterianism “has almost no denominational-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant, RD) members” (Gary North). It is not officially asked of those who make public profession of faith whether they wholeheartedly believe (agree with) the doctrine of the Word of God as the Church has summarized it in her Confession(s). “In the OPC, a minimal amount is required for membership, and this minimal confession does not encompass all that is summarized in the confessions (standards) of the churches.” (b) “The OPC requires a confession of only a thumb-nail sketch of the gospel for communicant membership and not adherence to the Westminster Standards.” (c)

2) In practice, “the OPC isolates a part of the Bible (the so-called ‘heart of the gospel’ as summarized in their four questions for membership) from the whole Word of God. The prospective member must believe ‘the Bible... to be the Word of God.’ But this confession about the character of the Bible is not the same as believing the teaching of the Bible as the church has summarized them in its confessions.” (d) “Thus in the OPC it is possible to make a credible confession of faith while still not believing as true some things taught in the Bible and confessed in the Westminster Standards.” (e)

3) In the OPC there is a greater variety of practice concerning those who make public profession of faith. That variety of practice underlines the weakness in the OPC on the point of confessional membership or binding. Some 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. So, “it is extremely difficult to evaluate the confessional stand in the

OPC, because only ministers and elders are bound to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and then only to an ill-defined ‘system of doctrine.’ What is included in that ‘system’ is not clear.”  
(f)

### ***ASKING SOME QUESTIONS***

As we come to some conclusions we also come to some consequential questions. Why is it that Presbyterianism “has almost no denominational-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant, RD) members?” (Gary North). Why are only ministers and elders bound to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and then only to an ill-defined “system” of doctrine? Why an Adopting Act that has so many “loopholes” in terms of its ambiguous, indefinite or “loose” language that full and strict subscription to the confessional standards of the church becomes practically impossible? Why has the Presbyterian subscription debate carried-on for well over three-centuries? And, why does this debate continue unabated and unresolved even today? Why do Presbyterian churches not simply make wholehearted agreement by ALL communicant members to the church’s confession of the truth of the Word of God mandatory? Why is it that, after three-centuries of debate, there is still no such mandatory requirement? A closer look at the history of Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism will help us in coming to a better understanding as to why it is that there is “almost no denominational-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant, RD) members.”

### ***THE AMERICAN SCENE***

The policy of not requiring members of the church to hold to the confessional standards became the official practice of the American Presbyterian church in the eighteenth century. The first U.S. Presbytery was formed in Philadelphia in 1706, and the Presbyterian “strict” versus “loose subscription” debate that began in Scotland in the 1690’s continued in the 1720’s in the new American Church. When we discussed the so-called American “Presbyterian conflict” we mentioned that it is generally dated from 1922 to 1936. Gary North does not follow this tradition. He writes that this “American” conflict lasted from 1721 (the beginning of the debate over strict versus loose subscription to the Confession) to November 1936. We are told that “the Presbyterian conflict was a battle over the degree of subscription and the system of sanctions appropriate to defend subscription.”

“The attempt to form an American Presbytery church necessitated creating a union between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. Unfortunately, the two groups held quite different views of the Westminster Standards. The Presbyterians wanted the standards to be binding upon the office-bearers whereas the Congregationalists only wanted the standards as non-binding guides. The controversy was settled in 1729 with the acceptance of the Adopting Act which states that the standards are “in all the ESSENTIAL AND NECESSARY ARTICLES, good FORMS of sound words and SYSTEMS of Christian doctrine” (emphasis added). (g)

This “loose” language as found in the Adopting Act of 1729 is clearly the consequence of a cleverly contrived compromise between Presbyterians and Congregationalists; between strict and loose subscriptionist. Gary North writes that “in the new American Church ‘loose subscriptionists’ opposed any tightening of synodical authority, especially over the creedal requirements for ordination.” The “loose” language as found in the Adopting Act became the “loophole” which

loose subscriptionists have been looking for to escape the consequences of full or strict subscription, and to legitimize their overt opposition to a variety of articles in the Confession. Gary North notes that “the same debate over subscription is still going on in the Presbyterian Church in America.”

#### **BACK TO WESTMINSTER**

In Scotland the debate over subscription to the Westminster Confession already began in the 1690’s, which is within 50 years of the Westminster Assembly’s adjournment. The unresolved battle about strict versus loose subscription and the system of sanctions appropriate to defend subscription relegated the documents hammered out by English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly to the status of museum pieces. Lax subscriptionism robbed the Confession of any substantial authority in the church. Gary North writes that “from the beginning, the assembly found that it had to compromise drastically on ecclesiology if it was to get Parliament to accept its recommendations, a political goal which it never did achieve. In that fruitless ecclesiastical compromise, the Assembly bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism that is still not resolved in those secessionist Presbyterian Churches that take seriously at least some of the Assembly’s documents.” (h)

“One should keep in mind that from the very beginning the Presbyterian churches never envisioned subscribing to the standards. Indeed, when certain of the delegates to the Westminster Assembly suggested that all the members of the church should hold to the standards, the House of Commons intervened and ordered that only ‘competent knowledge,’ or as it is called in the OPC, ‘credible profession’ is the rule. The profession required of members is less than that required of office bearers and is a profession which is not to be judged by the standards of the church.” (i)

#### ***A CONFSSIONAL CHURCH?***

In our last editorial on “The Subscription Debate” (j) we promised to continue our discussion on “the conclusion that suggests itself,” namely, “that no Presbyterian Church can truly be called a confessional church.” In giving some further thought to this matter we can see why this “conclusion” so readily “suggests itself.” When we review what we wrote in points 1-3 under the heading “COMING TO SOME CONCLUSIONS,” then we can summarize this conclusion with the following statement:

It is extremely difficult to evaluate the confessional stand in the OPC. Even today the three-century old Presbyterian subscription debate continues unabated and unresolved. And this debate will continue unresolved and “ad infinitum” because the ambiguous or “loose” language as found in the Adopting Act is not simply the result of an unfortunate linguistic oversight, but the consequence of a cleverly contrived compromise. This “American” compromise is already the fruit or consequence of the “fruitless ecclesiastical compromise” perpetrated at the Westminster Assembly, a compromise that “bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism that is still not resolved in those secessionist Presbyterian Churches that take seriously at least some of the Assembly’s documents” (Gary North).

There is in Presbyterianism “almost no denominational-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant, RD) members.” It is not officially asked of those who make public profession of

faith whether they “wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions, and taught here in this Christian Church.” The OPC requires only a thumb-nail sketch of the gospel for communicant membership and not adherence to the Westminster Standards. It is therefore no wonder that “the conclusion that suggests itself” is that “no Presbyterian Church can truly be called a confessional church.” And since this conclusion suggests itself, we suggest nothing different. If a suggestion is needed, perhaps it is this: Let’s listen closely to what Presbyterians themselves have said about the traditional Reformed practice of confessional membership or confessional binding at the time that the congregation at Blue Bell was forced out of the OPC (1983-84).

### ***A COUPLE OF CLOSING QUOTES***

1) In the Annual Report of the Committee on Candidates and Credentials to the Presbytery of Philadelphia (May 1, 1983 - April 30, 1984) we read that “the (committee on - RD) candidates has reservations regarding Mr. Kok’s (Rev. K.A. Kok of Blue Bell, RD) candidacy on the basis of his views on church membership and related matters... (Mr. Kok) holds a **TRADITIONAL REFORMED POSITION** on the requirements for church membership and admission to the Lord’s supper. The Committee believes **SUCH VIEWS TO BE INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE PRESBYTERIAN VIEW.**” (Emphasis added)

2) From the Letter to the Pulpit Committee of the OPC in Blue Bell, October 16, 1983, by Rev. John J. Mitchell. “There is no such thing as a Reformed church that limits itself to those who can **FULLY ACCEPT ALL MAJOR DOCTRINES OF THE REFORMED FAITH**; such a body is a sect, **NOT A CHURCH.**” (Emphasis added)

These closing quotes brings to the fore the necessity to candidly examine the Presbyterian view of church and church government. We hope to do so, the Lord willing, in a future installment.

Ron Dykstra

(a) & (h) Crossed Fingers - How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church, Gary North, Introduction (p.11 & 21).

(b) & (d) Confession and Membership, B.R. Hofford, Reformed Polemics, Jan. 29/00.

(c) & (e) Confession and Membership, B.R. Hofford, Reformed Polemics, Feb. 26/00.

(f), (g) & (i) Presbyterian or Reformed?, K.A. Kok.

(j) The Subscription Debate (3) - The “System of Doctrine,” Reformed Polemics, May 27/00.

## **Church in the Last Days**

*'Continue in what you have learned'* <sup>(2)</sup>

By Dr. P. van Gorp

### ***The underlying disease***

We repeat that we may not close our eyes to the many good things the Lord still gives us. For example, the faithful preaching of the Word is still heard. The struggle against the religious consumerism in the churches; the reverence for the Lord, and an obedient life in the covenant can be seen from place to place. But we cannot get away from the question: where does this whole development that is so alarming (that was portrayed in the first segment of this article: Ref Pol Vol6, No17 - ed.) come from? How are we do deal with it? We already pointed out that secularization does not bypass the church. The Lord points out that the basic characteristic of this is that people want to determine for themselves which way they want to go. They love themselves, ultimately seek themselves and want to be autonomous. That leads to all those deviations mentioned in 2 Timothy 3.

It may sound harsh but this is the mark by which the religious consumerism in the church is identified. The evangelical influence steers in that direction: the pious person comes to stand in the center, with his decision to surrender himself to Jesus (so to speak), with the growth and experience of his faith. The Reformed heritage is apparently not sufficient anymore. New teachers from far away have to be brought in. That is also reflected in opinions about the preaching, the place of the proclamation of the Word in the whole of liturgy, the enormous pressure to flood the churches with all kinds of hymns, the rejection of the Scriptural way of speaking about the church and the doctrine of the church, seeking alliances outside the communion of saints for the coming of the kingdom of God, the disappearing of ecclesiastical awareness.

At least once a week we read of special services for special groups (we make an exception for services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing) in which children and outsiders and even other categories of people set the tone; a tone which deviates from the Scripturally Reformed form of worship service.

To our sorrow we have to conclude that in all this the first love of the Liberation is in the process of disappearing. The Lord rebuked the church in Ephesus for that already fifty years after the apostle Paul had brought the gospel there and the church had flourished. As Paul had warned at his farewell to the elders in Ephesus, false teachers had indeed come in, out of their own midst. But beside this we have to point out that the reverence for the holy God of the covenant is disappearing more and more. This happens not only in the language used but especially in the personalistic way of speaking about one's own decisions of faith. This is more Arminian than Reformed. The concept of the covenant becomes an increasingly forgotten chapter. The spirit of the last days, as described in 2 Timothy 3, among other places, threatens the church more than we have been aware of till now.

### ***A worldly answer***

Here we come to the point we are aiming at: to discover what all these symptoms are pointing to. With an appeal to the Christian freedom a plea is made to leave each other free.

After the Liberation, obedience to the Lord blossomed in the fact that we saw it as our calling to let the reformation permeate all of life. The result was that Reformed organizations were established. With them we pursued the world with the salvation the Lord had granted in his church, the salvation preserved and brought to new life in the Liberation. Those Reformed organizations are to be useful for letting the blessing of the faithful preaching and administration of the sacraments and exercise of church discipline spill out over all of society, from out of the church. But today this is being dismissed as activism (repeatedly by P.A. Bergwerff in Nederlands Dagblad, and others). We already mentioned the subject of the gap between the church and the world. This topic has been broached by the EO (Evangelical Radio Broadcast) and various leading persons have broadcasted their opinions. A few recent statements in this respect are: the institutional forms of the church have become obsolete, even preaching is a thing of the past. Church life is considered of little value. It is even ridiculed: "We are playing church on Sundays." Change is the key word. The message of the church is considered irrelevant.

Behind all this is the legitimate question: how do we reach our nation with the gospel?

The Scriptural answer

To respond immediately to the call for change, we ask: are Christians indeed called to bridge the gap? Should we not first determine which gap is under discussion here? For right from the beginning the Lord has set his people apart. And the gospel of the Lord, the call to repentance, remains hard to swallow. That is precisely the power of the church. For the message should not be peddled but proclaimed. And that should not only be a witnessing in words but in a life out of God's Word. We are to let our light shine before the people so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven, Matthew 5:16. Speaking of a dialogue with the world, of interaction with outsiders, obscures our view of the calling of the church in the last days, as this is described under the image of the two witnesses (Revelation 11). They are clothed in sackcloth because they preach repentance. They call people to repent because the Lord Jesus Christ is coming to judge and only with Him there is safety. Those two witnesses, the church in the last days that calls society to repentance, form God's last gift to the world. That is why we have to listen to the charge the Lord, by his apostle, gives to Timothy and so also to us. What then is that charge to Timothy? The apostle solemnly commands it before the face of God and in view of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Preach the Word—proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, for it is not a human word you are bringing. Be prepared continually, in season and out of season, in spite of opposition. In a way, a pastor is never off duty, he is always a minister! Correct, rebuke! Teach at the same time, but with great patience. The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. For what is decisive for them is what they themselves desire. Not God, but their own self is the norm for preaching, doctrine and life. That is what is in the foreground. Not the teaching, but the teacher. They are seeking teachers who appear sympathetic to them, who captivate them, who say what their itching ears want to hear, who come with new ideas.

The sound doctrine, however, not only is sound but also makes sound. The law of God gives life, Psalm 19:8. Instruction is a fountain of life, Proverbs 13:14. Therefore the main charge, the first

and most important command of the Lord is: continue in what you have learned and what has been entrusted to you.

***Remain in the “aforesaid doctrine”***

We know that expression, “the aforesaid doctrine” from the old form for baptism. It is the doctrine taught here in this Christian church as the true and complete doctrine of salvation. The parents are asked to promise to instruct their child in this doctrine. The Lord has Paul write the same thing to Timothy: Continue in what you have learned. It says: continue IN what you have learned. We immediately think here of what the Lord had his apostle John write in his letters about this remaining. This word is used twenty-two times in John’s first letter. To remain in Him means to keep his commandments, to remain in the truth. What you have heard must remain in you. Remain in Him and He will remain in us. The anointing remains on you. Remaining in the doctrine means that this doctrine surrounds and protects a growing child. It preserves our whole life from the idols. One day it will let us leave this life comforted by God’s promises.

This does not exclude progress. The question is however in which way we make progress. Therefore the apostle admonishes us in 2 John 9: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God.” This means a person who introduces novelties and surpasses and goes beyond the doctrine of Christ and does not remain in it. We also listen to the warning of the Lord to the Philippians in Chapter 3:15, 16: “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

The word “mature” or “perfect” here does not mean that we have already arrived at perfection. It is taken from the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 6:40 about a disciple who is “fully taught.” This means one who follows the Lord Jesus Christ in his suffering and is not ashamed of Him. So there are differences of opinion, even when we want to be disciples of Christ. But the Lord will reveal that. This is what we mean by “libertas prophetandi,” the liberty within the church to have our own conviction on the basis of what we have understood from Scripture. Of course this has to be within the framework of the Confession.

We should note that this means at the same time that we should not acquiesce in differences of opinion. When the Lord promises that He will reveal it, we should not acquiesce in having different opinions about something. On the contrary, we should make use of our “libertas prophetandi.” We should not profit from what is not clear, but prophesy. This is something Synod neglected to do when it acquiesced in what it pointed out as a difference of opinion regarding the commandment to rest on the Sunday. Synod opted for compromising behind the scenes, as we learned from a delegate. So we are warned not to fall back or to deviate from what we have already attained. On the contrary, we have to live up to what we have already attained. Actually it says that we have to stand in one row and walk in single file as in the army. That is the rule we must follow. Then the peace and mercy of God comes to us, Galatians 6:16.

***What can the righteous do?***

What should we do in the mean time? How will we be able to stem all these developments?

When we try to do that we often strike against a wall of misunderstanding. We can write and warn all we want, but when it is ignored systematically, what do we achieve? It reminds us of the weary sigh of Psalm 11:3: “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

Elijah said: “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts ... and I am the only one left.” Indeed, sometimes we may think that way in our own local church. But then the Lord answers that his number remains: seven thousand, a small but a complete number. In the end it will even be a multitude that no one can number.

That is our comfort. In this comfort we keep expecting all things from Him who promised that there will always be a church of Christ and that in vain the gates of hell will oppose her. It is necessary to live in this comfort. We need to know our own misery, sin and shortcomings. In the church we need to seek the good of Jerusalem continually. We need to do this in our prayers; by being involved, and in our speaking. We should never stand on the sidelines but sound the call to remain in the doctrine entrusted to us. And we are to show consideration which the Lord demands in the church regarding matters that do not go against the Word of God, difficult though that may be. Who knows which ways the Lord will go with his church in our country in the coming years?

With great interest we are looking out for the brothers and sisters who in the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde kerk) are fighting for what they call the preservation of this church. They want to return to a church that remains faithful to Scripture and Confession. They are searching for union with all true Reformed believers. We too may and should long for that unity of true Reformed people who seek to preserve the marks of the true church in all things, the older together with the coming generation. Let us follow the example of Paul who could pass it on to the young Timothy. Let us imitate our Lord who promised to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.

To be church in the last days—even though it becomes increasingly difficult to remain in the true doctrine, and harder to keep ourselves unstained from the world—we have His promise that He is with us. He knows where we live, namely, where the throne of Satan is. We really live in the last days: we expect Him who will make an end to all false teaching and confusion and worldliness and secularization, and who will make all things new.

He will even shorten the days for the sake of his elect. For his promise remains and gives us power and courage for the future: no one will snatch them out of My hand.

## **LETTERS**

Dear Editors,

While it is laudable that RP is giving attention to the plight of our fathers and their children in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the article ‘Home Schooling in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century’ by Mr. Vander Jagt in RP of April 22, 2000, unfortunately contains inaccuracies. Please allow me to highlight some of them.

Mr. Vander Jagt states that ‘the disagreements between the congregations were eventually resolved so that these seceding churches could unite into one denomination’. Aside from calling that

federation a denomination, it would have been more accurate to say that ‘by June 17, 1869, the disagreements between most of the congregations were resolved’. A number of congregations remained separated (initially three, more later), with Rev. Ledeboer as a leader. In 1907 they formed the Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland en Noord Amerika (Netherlands Reformed Congregations) under the leadership of Rev. G. H. Kersten.

It is incorrect to say that “in 1806 the use of the Bible became a felony’. The school law of 1806 actually encouraged the teaching of Christian virtues, and even Groen van Prinsterer (in his *Handboek voor de Geschiedenis van het Vaderland*, published 1841-1846) recognized that the Dutch Reformed majority was able to allow the public schools to maintain a Christian character for at least some time. Over a period of some 40 or 50 years, however, the presence of the Bible in the public school indeed became politically incorrect and forbidden - but the absence of the Bible in the 1815 General List of School Books for the Northern Netherlands was explicitly not meant to suggest that it should therefore be absent from the schools: ‘by listing the Bible among other school books, its due honour and respect would be undermined.... The document would even suggest that teachers should be encouraged and forced to properly use it. They already have that duty and in the Introduction to the List of School Books teachers were exhorted to use the Bible most appropriately with their students...’ As late as the early 1850s - almost 50 years later! - a teacher in Zaandam (mistakenly) believed it was acceptable for her to read the Bible with a class of only protestant children. (To keep her job, she stopped reading the Bible.)

It should be noted that, in 1843, King William II made a generous personal donation to the council of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Hague to start a ‘Diaconal School’ for 700 students, in which the Bible and Christian doctrine could be taught freely (but without government support). The year before, he had decreed that in appointing public school teachers, the religions of the constituencies should be considered, and his minister of education had clarified that it was strictly forbidden for a teacher to offend any religion by explanations or expressions.

(Quotes and references are from: J. Kuiper, *Geschiedenis van het Christelijk Lager Onderwijs in Nederland*, Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1904; and from: H. Bouma, *Een Vergeten Hoofdstuk*. Enschede: J. Boersma, 1959).

Keith Sikkema

Dear brother Sikkema and Editors

I must admit that I neglected to mention the Rev. Ledeboer and the formation of the REFORMED CONGREGATIONS. I had intended to emphasize the development of the Christian schools in the Netherlands and purposely omitted as much as possible the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century church since I expect the readers of RP to know it due to the vast amount of literature available.

You prefer to call the group of secession churches a federation and I defined it as a denomination. I am not sure if these churches formed a federation or a confederation. {The consistories have the highest authority in a confederation, the synod in a federation} I do not understand what is wrong with the general term denomination, which is defined in several dictionaries, e.g., Webster, as “the

act of naming an organization of similar religious congregations”.

Your last remark, in which you object to my statement that “in 1806 the use of the Bible became a felony”, is, without doubt, very interesting. This is especially so because you seem to confuse the difference between a commandment and its interpretation. You correctly state that the government recommended the use of the Bible and the teaching of

so-called Christian virtues. However, the proper use of the Bible was forbidden and the Christian virtues were the virtues as taught according to the Enlightenment philosophy which is in reality antichristian. You refer to the well known Groen Van Prinsterer. I like to quote him also. In his first speech in the Dutch parliament he said, “Yes, the education in the Netherlands is unchristian since the law of 1806 which united all the persuasions, introduced a principle by which the Bible was not allowed to be read at all or only after having the approval of a Romanist clergyman.... It is antichristian because the doctrinal teaching appears to be excluded, but in reality another doctrinal teaching is being given.... It is antichristian because it proclaims a supreme Being in stead of the only Mediator, a universal Father of mankind without accepting the chasm, generated by sin; it is antichristian because one preaches thus to the youthful mind a God, who is a vision of human wisdom, an idol, erected with the denial of the living God of the Revelation (my translation).<sup>1</sup>

Another reliable and much respected source during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was C. S. Smeenk. He explains that the law of 1806 was dominated by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The purpose of this law was the education (and I quote :) “unto ‘all social and Christian virtues’, but the content of these Christian virtues was barely biblical.<sup>2</sup> The government officially advised the teachers to read and explain the Bible, but they were not allowed to mention anything that would disagree with other opinions. The government and the king used the schools in order to propagate unity. “The artificial endeavour toward ‘unity’ resulted in colorlessness in the educational field. The educational system was not allowed to create a separation between the Dutch citizens.<sup>3</sup> It is true that some schools, situated, for example in the provinces Holland, Utrecht and Cleveland, were able to maintain during a short time a truly Christian character for the simple reason that no parent disagreed with it. However, this was impossible in communities with a Romanist church and priest since they protested the reading of the bible in school, so that, in accordance with the law, the Bible could not be used anymore. The Dutch government introduced the same law in the Belgian provinces in 1825, after they had joined the Dutch nation. It became a complete failure and contributed heavily to the Belgian desire for independence received in 1830. The Dutch government allowed private, Christian schools to be established, provided that they were paid for by private funds and had received the permission of the local government. A few of these schools were established but it was frequently impossible to get the permission of the local governments, which used any type of argument to refuse such requests. It took Groen van Prinsterer and some friends six years and many official requests to get permission to start a Christian school in The Hague. Such requests were refused in many cities so that Leeuwarden, Zwolle, Dordrecht, Axel, Sneek and Rotterdam never received any permission establish them.

Many more interesting facts are available concerning this topic, but I limited the contents of my article so that the emphasis is on creating an interest into the unique development of the Christian school in the Netherlands.

A. Vander Jagt

1. Adviezen in de Tweede Kamer de Staten-Generaal in dubbelen getale, Leiden, 1840, blz. 36 ev.
- 2 Christelijk Sociale Beginselen, C. S. Smeenk, J. H. Kok , Kampen, The Netherlands.
- 3 De Kerk IV, A. P. v. Esch, D. C. Haak, J. L. Struik, Firma Groenendijk, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.