

COMING TO GRIPS WITH REALITY ⁽²⁾

The Lingering Reluctance to Face the Facts

In our previous editorial with the same title (a) we discussed the "specific church 'concept'" that allows for admission of guests to the Lord's Supper on the basis of their own testimony (self-attestation). This discussion was prompted by what we read in Rev. Cl. Stam's editorials in *Clarion* (b). In these editorials he "touched on the report of the Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas (CCCA)." And we learned that "when it comes to admitting guest to the Lord's Supper, the RCUS (Reformed Church in the United States) follows a more defined and careful approach than the OPC does." We are told, "admission (of guests, RD) is based on more than a 'verbal warning' but the decision (to attend the Lord's Supper, RD) is still left to the individual." From Rev. Stam's editorials in *Clarion* we also learned that behind the RCUS acceptance of a personal decision (by guests to attend the Lord's Supper) "lies a specific church 'concept' not unlike the one that exists in the OPC" (Orthodox Presbyterian Church).

THE "SPECIFIC CHURCH 'CONCEPT'" EFFECT

In the RCUS the effect of this so-called "specific church 'concept'" has allowed for the practice of admission of guests to the Lord's Supper on the basis of their own testimony (self-attestation). In the OPC this "specific church 'concept'" has produced the practice of admitting to the Lord's Supper all "earnest Christians" even though their confession is incompatible with the confession of the OPC. In 1975 the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC) *officially* changed their stand on the admission of guests to the Lord's Supper. In the CRC this "specific church 'concept'" resulted in a change in the rules to allow "*all* sincere believers" to attend. These sincere believers did not necessarily need to be members of the CRC (Acts 1975, art. 101). In the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) this "specific church 'concept'" has also made inroads. It has manifested itself in the willingness of some to accept a practice whereby, in the words of Rev. Stam, "the table is not properly fenced as per Article 61 of the Church Order." (c) More to the point, it has resulted in practices that are neither scriptural nor reformed.

PLAIN PLURIFORMITY

As already noted, in Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism this "specific church 'concept'" as drafted by the "Dissenting Brethren of Westminster" became known as "the denominational theory of the church." And, since according to the third principle of this denominational theory "no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth", pluralism or church pluriformity became the norm. This "specific church 'concept'" that allows for a variety of questionable practices in regard to admission of guest to the Lord's Supper, also had consequences for so-called "confessional membership" (communicant membership) or confessional binding. For, as soon as church-pluriformity is practiced, the very fact of being bound to confessions is undermined. Therefore the Presbyterian practice of officers (office-bearers) subscribing to the "system of doctrine" contained in the confessions and "subscribing with scruples" remains an unavoidable reality; a reality as real as the unwillingness of some to acknowledge the continuing existence of this long-established

Presbyterian practice. In order to assist us in coming to grips with the reality of this destructive Presbyterian practice of subscribing with "crossed fingers" (Gary North), we will take a look at a recent issue of Christian Renewal.

SUBSCRIPTION AND SCRUPLES

Morton H. Smith, a minister in the PCA (Presbyterian Church of America), wrote a booklet titled, *The Subscription Debate: Studies in Presbyterian Polity*. In the "Book Review" of this booklet in *Clarion* (Aug. 25/95), the matter of "subscription to the confessional standards" by Presbyterians and "the system of doctrine contained in the confessions" is explained in order to address the supposed wrong perceptions and impressions we may have about the OPC and "what Presbyterianism is all about." We are assured, on the basis of the statements made by Morton H. Smith (PCA minister) that "the historic Presbyterian position is one of full, or strict subscription, that is, that the confessions are adopted because they contain the system of doctrine taught in Scripture." (d)

However, we read in the September 25/00 issue of *Christian Renewal* about "a Biblical studies professor at Geneva College in Pennsylvania" who was ordained in the PCA. His name is Rev. Byron Curtis. He attended the REFORMED Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, and graduated from the REFORMED Theological Seminary in Jackson, Fla. And in spite of having attended these seminaries prefaced with the word "Reformed", the Presbyterian practice of subscribing with scruples continued to be a viable option for him and other ministers ordained in the PCA. We read that "during his examination for ordination, Curtis said he registered five exceptions to the Westminster Standards, including one holding open the possibility of creation in some time other than six literal days. Curtis believed all his exceptions to be minor, and the presbytery showed AGREEMENT in granting him those exceptions by a nearly UNANIMOUS vote." We are told that "on the matter of subscription" there remain strong views. "On one side of the decades-old debate are those who call for 'strict' subscription, or upholding every word of the Confession. On the other side is 'system' subscription, or agreement with the basic tenets but *not necessarily* every article." (e)

One cannot help but wonder if Morton H. Smith, in spite of having written a booklet on "The Subscription Debate: Studies in Presbyterian Church Polity", really has a good understanding of "what Presbyterianism is all about", or what is happening in the PCA. And we note (again) the destructive influence of the third principle of the denominational theory of the church, namely that "no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth." Consequently, "system" or "loose" subscription is the answer; "agreement with the basic tenets but not necessarily every article" is the order of the day. That is why the three-century long Presbyterianism "strict versus loose" subscription debate continues unabated and unresolved. That is why the OPC requires a confession of only a thumbnail sketch of the gospel for communicant membership and not adherence to the Westminster Standards.

Behind all of this lies the so-called "specific church 'concept'" mentioned by Rev. Stam in his editorials; the church concept that is irrecoverably infected by "a strain of the pluriformity virus."

People who embrace and espouse this "specific church 'concept'" can justifiably decline to be strictly or fully bound to the confessional standards of the church, since "no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth." For such is the irrefutable reality of what happens when we give our "required agreement" to what "historic orthodox Protestantism" allows or what Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism permits.

A RECURRENT CLICHÉ

In the course of our almost three-decade-long unity discussions with the OPC there have been many church members who have expressed their reservation about what the Westminster Confession (WC) says, among other things, about the covenant and the church. Attempts to bring these matters into discussion have often been derailed with a statement found in the Acts of Gen. Synod Coaldale 1977. There we read: "The General Synod of our Netherlands sister churches in 1967 accepted the statement of the Regional Synod of Groningen that the Westminster Confessions of Faith is "een voluit Gereformeerd belijdenisgeschrift" (a fully Reformed confession, RD) (Acta, Article 241, D). (Gen. Synod 1977, Article 91, II Consideration d). Further discussion is made superfluous by means of the frequently parroted cliché that "the Westminster Confession has ALWAYS been CONSIDERED a *fully* REFORMED confession" (emphasis added, RD). This generally accepted but also rather questionable assertion prompts us to ask a few pertinent questions: ALWAYS considered *fully* reformed? Considered *fully* reformed by WHOM and ON WHAT BASIS? Obviously these crucial questions require a considered response.

ALWAYS CONSIDERED FULLY REFORMED?

In 1952, well *before* the Gen. Synod of our Netherlands sister Churches in 1967, some brothers living in Tasmania were encouraged by a certain Rev. Schep to join in a united Reformed/Presbyterian church. They asked for direction from their previous Consistory in Rotterdam, and they received a lengthy answer. Some excerpts from this Consistory's advice: "The consistory therefore concludes that church institution, on the grounds of the Westminster Confession, by a right-minded Reformed person is not possible... If Church life must be built in this way, in no time you will have a synodical yoke under which not only you, but also the coming generations will have to bow their neck. Not to say anything of the covenant view of the Westminster Confession. You do well in Tasmania to bind yourself only to the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order." (f)

The *reality* then is that the Westminster Confession (WC) has NOT ALWAYS been considered a fully reformed confession. It was not considered a *fully* reformed confession in 1952 by the Consistory in Rotterdam. Already prior to that date K. Schilder did not consider it a *fully* reformed confession: "The Westminster Confession (by far not reformed as regards the doctrine of the Church)." (g) It was not considered a *fully* reformed confession by many churches and church members who appealed the premature decision of Gen. Synod 1977 to recognize the OPC as a true church; a decision for which subsequent Gen. Synods were later obliged to provide proper grounds. The WC was not considered a *fully* reformed confession in 1984 when the Church at Blue Bell seceded from the OPC (1983-84): "Some seem to think that we adopted the Three Forms of Unity

out of preference. We adopted them because they faithfully summarize the Word of God, and the Westminster Standards do not... We did what we did in order to remain faithful to our God." (h)

CONSIDERED BY *WHOM* AND *ON WHAT BASIS*?

After the decision of Gen. Synod 1977 to recognize the OPC as a true church, the Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechism) became the subject of study and discussion at our Consistory meetings. To assist the brothers in this study and discussion it was decided to purchase copies of "A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards" - with explanatory notes by James Benjamin Green (reprinted by Collins + World, 1976). Some of the brothers deemed the purchase and study of this book to be somewhat superfluous. They knew this confession to be *fully* reformed even *before* they had read or studied it because, parroting the consideration of Synod 1977, "the Westminster Confession has ALWAYS been CONSIDERED a *fully* REFORMED confession."

A similar scenario seems to have taken place at Gen. Synod 1977. The "consideration" that the Westminster Confession is a *fully* reformed confession was largely based on a statement "accepted" from Gen. Synod 1967 of our Netherlands sister Churches. This Gen. Synod in turn "accepted" the statement of the Regional Synod Groningen. And to assure us that this synodical statement has some credence, Gen. Synod 1977 added the consideration that "no evidence has been brought forward so as to question the above statement of our Netherlands sister Churches" (Gen. Synod 1977, Article 91, II Consideration e).

That leaves us with a question or two: Has there ever been evidence brought forward to prove that these three particular synods did in fact "consider" (actually study) the WC rather than simply accept (repeat) the statements made by other ecclesiastical assemblies? Also: Why is it that the readiness of our synods to accept the statements of others about the WC does not extend to those made by our (formerly Presbyterian) brothers and sisters in Laurel, Blue Bell and Denver?

A REALITY CHECK

The discussion or debate about whether the WC is indeed a *fully* reformed confession loses some of its momentum when we learn that in Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism there is almost no denomination-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant) members. The Westminster Confession, because it is "by far not reformed as regards the doctrine of the Church" (K. Schilder), espouses an ecclesiology that has room for "plural forms of the Church" (Robert S. Paul). The "invisible" church concept as professed in the WC and further elaborated upon in the OPC's Form of Government has perpetuated the practice of pluralism or church pluriformity. This "specific church 'concept'" is the reason why the Lord's Supper table is not properly supervised and communicant members are not required to fully adhere to the Westminster Standards.

It therefore should not come as a complete surprise when we read in the preface of the book "A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards" the following bit of pastoral advice: "This creed is not placed in anybody's hands to be swallowed whole; but to be chewed, digested, and

assimilated, **if found to be proper food.** 'A creed is not a goal but a landmark.' Start with the Church's creed. **Accept it if you can. Reject it if you must...**" (i)

Such is the consequence of the "specific church 'concept'" that is founded on the principle that "no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth." It becomes impossible to bind communicant church members to the truth of the Word of God as the Church has summarized it in her confession(s) if in the true Church of Christ the truth cannot be fully known. And it is impossible for us to be of assistance to "others who also in faithfulness seek to serve the Lord" if we ourselves, on the matter of this "specific church 'concept'", refuse to face the facts and come to grips with reality.

Ron Dykstra

- a) Reformed Polemics, April 28/01.
- b) Editorials, Clarion, Jan. 19/01 and Feb. 2/01.
- c) Editorial, Clarion, March 30/01.
- d) Book Review, Clarion, Aug. 25/95.
- e) Creation, Confession and Subscription, Doug Barnes, Christian Renewal, Sept 25/00.
- f) Information, May 21/94.
- g) De Kerk, K Schilder, Volume III p 364. "De Westminster Confessie (lang niet gereformeerd inzake de kerkleer)"
- h) Information, Jan. 16/93.
- i) "A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards" with explanatory notes by James Benjamin Green. (Reprinted by Collins + World, 1976, seventh printing).

ARE DEACONS MEMBERS OF THE SESSION?

Do deacons belong to the Session or not? Generally speaking, in Presbyterian circles, the answer is no. Deacons hold their own meetings. They may advise the Session of elders on various matters within their sphere of operation, but in general they are guided and directed by the ruling body of elders.

But this is not always the practice. In many churches of continental Reformed persuasion deacons and elders together form the ruling body of the church. Sometimes deacons are removed when discussion concerns pastoral methods, but the trend in many churches today is for more and more involvement of the deacons in the matters of the ruling Session. One need only look at the current practice (and church order) of the Christian Reformed Churches, to name but one example.

I don't know how much this trend might be evident in churches of the OPC, but it is surely an issue that ought to be examined. Why is it that Reformed and Presbyterian churches seem to differ on this point? Of course the only way the point can properly be resolved, is by going back to the Word of God and determining there the way that Christ would have His church ruled.

Yet as a preliminary to that study (which I leave to others), I would like to investigate in this article the more historical question. Is it really true that Reformed churches have always differed with Presbyterians on this point? Or is the current practice in many Reformed churches a move away from their own heritage? As I hope to show, the current trend of including deacons as full members of a ruling Session was certainly not the practice of the Reformed fathers.

At the great Synod of Dort 1618-1619 the Arminians challenged our fathers by arguing that the Belgic Confession art.30 was in conflict with the church order and Scripture, as regarding the constitution of the Session, and ought to be changed. Our fathers did not accept this interpretation of the Confession and thus did not acquiesce to the demands of the Arminians in this respect.

What lay behind this decision? And what had the actual rulings and practice of the Reformed churches up to this point in time been with respect to the constitution of the Session? In what follows I hope briefly to outline the developments and decisions of the Reformed churches in this respect, firstly of those in France, and then of those in the Low Countries.

On May 25th, 1559 the first Synod of the French Reformed churches officially met with delegates representing 50 (out of a possible 75) local churches. At this first Synod the French Confession (drafted by Calvin) was adopted. Since this French Confession was to be the close model for De Bres' Belgic Confession, it is important to note that the French Confession does not make any allusion whatsoever to the constitution of a Session (cf. art.29). Calvin (the draftsman) himself understood the Session to be composed of elders (cf. Inst. IV:XI:6) and this was also the practice of the churches in Geneva.¹ However this first French Synod also published a church order (the "Discipline ecclesiastique") which read in art.20:

“The elders and deacons are the senate of the church of which the ministers of the Word shall take the chair.”²

So whilst the Confession did not state it explicitly, the understanding of the French Reformed churches regarding the constitution of the Session was at first different from Calvin (and also the Dutch tradition), as the French were in a number of other matters! Deddens in fact shows that the French conception of the task of a deacon was heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism (e.g. in matters pertaining to assistance with preaching and sacraments, their understanding was identical to the relation between bishop and deacon in contemporary Roman Catholicism).³

This all changed with the seventh Synod of La Rochelle in 1571 under the very capable direction of the chairman, Beza, from Geneva. Here the church order was modified stating:

“The ministers and elders form the Session, wherein the ministers shall preside, and the deacons may assist whenever the Session deems such appropriate.”⁴

The eighth Synod of Nimes 1572, however, stated more fully:

“The ministers of the Word of God, together with the elders, constitute the consistory of the church, over which the ministers must preside. And the deacons may and must be present at the assembly of the council, in order to be able to serve (the consistory) with their advice, just as we have up till now used them with success in the government of the church and since they were called to the task of elders. And in the future the deacons, joined with the pastors and elders shall have the direction of the church.”⁵

Here we see that the French inclusion of the deacons with the consistory was not because they viewed the office of deacon as a ruling office, but because they viewed their deacons as called at the same time to be assistant elders. Here they were evidently able to give some “after the fact” justification of their actual practice, whilst at the same time being careful not to blur (theologically) the Scriptural distinction between the office of elder and that of deacon. Nevertheless, this Synod still did not permit deacons to take part in discussion of discipline cases.⁶

In turning to the Reformed churches in the Low Countries, we come first to the Belgic Confession of Guido de Bres, published in 1561. As we have said, this was very closely modeled on the French Confession of 1559, yet the wording with respect to the offices of the church is slightly different. In art.30 it states:

“Wij geloven ... dat er ook Opzieners en Diakenen (moeten) zijn, om met de herders te zijn als een raad (Lat. quasi senatus) der Kerk. [We believe ... that there (must) also be overseers and deacons, who together with the pastors form a sort of a Council of the church]”⁷

Rutgers, the well known expert in church polity of late last century, noting the "als" (and Latin "quasi") points out that the confession at this point is merely making a comparison between the officers of the church and the senators on a town council. No church-political point is made regarding the proper composition of a Session. The general task of each office is merely circumscribed (which a reading of the complete article shows clearly).⁸ This was also the explanation current at the time of the Synod of Dort. The explanation was challenged some years later by the Englishman Seldon (an Erastian delegate to the Westminster Assembly) who alleged that the Synod of Dort had changed the meaning of the Confession by introducing the word "quasi" in the Latin translation. Voetius (a delegate to the Synod of Dort 1618-19), however, took Seldon to task, showing that in all the versions of the Confession prior to the Synod of Dort 1618-19, the text read "als een Raedt der Kercke" (“as if a council of the church”), thus intentionally distinguishing the officers and authority of the church from that of the state.⁹ Thus we may conclude that, like the French Confession, the Belgic Confession did not make any definitive statement on the constitution of the Session.

In 1568 a large gathering of office bearers from the Low Countries took place to prepare for the first Synod of the Reformed churches there. This Convent of Wezel (as it was called) also drafted a church order in which it was clearly stated that deacons were not a part of the Session (cf. cap.2 & 3; Cap.4:1,3,5,7,9,10ff). Yet the first Synod in Emden 1571 (which was highly influenced by the French who sent delegates) stated that deacons were a part of the Session!¹⁰

At the Synod of Dort 1574 this confusion was cleared up with a declaration declaring the intent of the decision of the Synod of Emden:

“In explanation of the articles of the Synod of Emden: The ministers of the Word, elders and deacons form a Consistory such that the ministers and elders shall assemble together alone, and also the deacons shall assemble separately in order to handle their respective business. However in places where there are few elders the deacons may be allowed to attend (the elders meeting) at the pleasure of the Consistory. The deacons must attend whenever they are called to do so by the Consistory.”¹¹

This way of putting things was continued by the various successive Synods in the Low Countries. Thus the Synod of Middelburg 1581 stated:

“There shall be a Session in all churches, consisting of Ministers of the Word and Elders.”¹²

In answer to a particular question as to whether the deacons may be allowed to attend Session meetings where there are few elders, the Synod said:

“It is permitted as often as the Session requests their counsel and help. In addition they may also ordinarily attend Session so (long as) they serve both offices, that of elder and that of deacon.”¹³

Here again we see that, as with the French churches, when deacons were allowed to attend Session meetings they were considered to be functioning not as deacons but as elders. In the Dutch tradition the deacons' attendance tended to be restricted to cases where there were very few elders. It should also be noted that the deacons were added for counsel and assistance, but nowhere is it said that they thereby became part of the Session proper. The idea was to include them for the sake of extra wisdom in discussion. The wording is in fact so cautious that it seems very doubtful that they ever had voting rights (even in cases of few elders). This is confirmed by the later objection of the Arminians to the Belgic Confession, for part of their objection was that the Belgic Confession seemed (to them) to suggest that deacons could have such voting rights (a practice unheard of!). The Synod of s'Gravenhage 1586 continued the same line and added the wording that was to become standard for centuries:

“And where the number of Elders is very small, the deacons shall be taken up along with the Session.”¹⁴

Again the wording is cautious and does not actually say that in such instances the deacons form a part of the Session itself. This wording was only slightly changed by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, which stated, "the deacons may be taken up along with the Session". As we have noted, at this Synod the Arminians argued that the Belgic Confession gave deacons voting rights on Session.¹⁵ However the Synod left the Confession as, understanding the relevant clause not to be speaking of

the constitution of a Session (see above). Therefore it did not see any contradiction between the Confession (art.30) and the Church Order.

Thus from the beginning of the Reformation the general Reformed line has been to limit the constitution of the Session to elders only and to permit deacons at times to attend (especially when the number of elders is few) and to give their wisdom, but not to allow them any part in the ruling of the church. When deacons attend such Session meetings, Reformed polity has consistently considered them not to be functioning in their office as deacon, but to be performing a special service and as such functioning as an elder.

It may be of interest to note that in 1644 four deacons from Rotterdam desiring to be considered part of the Session (but the Session having refused) appealed to the classis using as argument the decision of the Synod of Emden 1571 cited above. The classis denied the appeal so the brothers appealed to the next national synod that was never held.

At the Synod of Utrecht 1905, the relevant article of the Church Order was modified to state:

“And where the number of the Elders is small, the Deacons may be taken up along with the Session according to local regulation; which shall always occur where the number is less than three.”¹⁶

Given the clear history of the Reformed practice on this matter, we as churches should be doubly careful to be sure that we have solid Biblical grounds if we choose to depart from traditional Reformed church polity. The churches of the OPC should not think that this is merely a Presbyterian versus continental Reformed matter. It is rather the Reformed position that the Session only consists of the elders which is opposed to a departure from Reformed tradition where the deacons are given a formal place on the Session. Is such a departure really defensible from the Scriptures?

R. Dean Anderson Jr. December 1991

1. A. D. R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, vol.4, p.25.
2. *Bekennisschriften und K.O. der nach Gottes Wort ref. Kirche* herausg. von W. Niesel, M`nchen 1938, p.77, cited in Polman, *Op. cit.*, 25.
3. P. Deddens, *De Positie van de Diakenen ten aanzien van den Kerkeraad* (Rotterdam: Bureau Stichting “De Vrije Kerk,” 1948) p.16.
4. *La disc. ref. de France*, par D'Huisseau, Orleans 1675, p.144. (All references to this publication come from Deddens, *op. cit.*)
5. D'Huisseau, *op cit.* pp.144-145.
6. Polman, *op cit.* vol.4, p.28.
7. Note that the points made in the following discussion are made with respect to the official text of the Confession. The English translation in common use today is very misleading at this point.
8. F. L. Rutgers, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, vol.1, p.277.

9. *Politica Ecclesiastica, Pars III, Lib.I Tract.I Cap.VII, p.62ff.* Note too that in a similar way the Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 and 1561 spoke of the four offices for the government of the church (minister, teacher, elder, deacon) whilst deacons were at the same time excluded from the consistory. No contradiction between terminology and practise was understood by this way of speaking.

10. F. L. Rutgers (ed.) *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der 16e eeuw, s'Gravenhage 1889, p.58.*

11. "Tot verclaringhe des artikels des Embdtschen Synodi, soo sullen de Dienaers des Woordts, Ouderlinghen ende Diakenen de Consistorie maecken, Alsoo, dat de Dienaren ende Ouderlinghen alljeen onder hen versamelen sullen, oock de Diaconen bijsonder, om hare eijghen saecken die d'armen aengaen te verhandelen. Doch in plaetsen daer weinech Ouderlinghen sijn sullen de Diakenen toeghelaten mueghen worden na de begheerte der Consistorie. Ende de Diaconen sullen ghehouden worden te verschijnen wanneerse inde Consistorie beroepen worden." Rutgers (ed.), *Acta, p.139.*

12. "In allen Kercken sal een Kerckenraedt zijn, bestaende vut Dienaren des Woordts ende Ouderlinghen..." Rutgers (ed.), *Acta, pp.385-86.*

13. Oft den kercken, de welcke weynighe Ouderlinghen hebben, gheoorloft is den Diaconen tot den kerckenraedt toe te laeten? Antw. Het is gheoorloft soe dijckwils die kerckenraedt haeren raedt ende hulpe van doen sal hebben. Bouen dien sullen sy oock ordinaerlyck daer by moeghen wesen, soe zy beyde het ampt des Ouderlinckschaps ende Dyaconschaps bedienen." Rutgers (ed.), *Acta, p.405.*

14. "Ende daer t'ghetal vanden Ouderlinghen seer cleyn is, sullen die Diakenen mede tot den Kercken-Raet ghenomen worden." Rutgers (ed.), *Acta, p.495.*

15. *Acta et Scripta synodalia dordracena ministrorum remonstrantium: I:96f.* It should be noted that the Arminians at the time were attempting to find as many contradictions in the Confession as they could, for part of their general platform was that the Confession could not be held to be stringently binding on all office bearers. Thus their attempt at this point, to show the Confession to be in conflict with the Church Order and practice of the Reformed Churches.

16. P. Deddens, *op. cit., p.15.*

R. Dean Anderson Jr. December 1991

Ecclesiastical Fellowship

The Theme of General Synod 2001

Four times during the ten days of General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) in Neerlandia, the chairman, Rev. Cl. Stam of Hamilton, Ontario rose and led the body and attending audience in prayer and thanksgiving for a decision about the establishment of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with a church federation.

Having been a member of this synod it is impossible to report about it objectively. At the same time a member of synod who has been so hesitant about the establishment of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with certain church federations might consider the need to explain such decisions. It is no secret that all the decisions to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship were (eventually) unanimous.

IRB

I am sure that most, if not all, of our readers can rejoice together when they hear that the Canadian Reformed Churches have established Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Igreja Reformadas do Brazil. This very young church federation was established on July 5, 2000. At its constituent synod it was decided to offer the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship to the Canadian Reformed Churches. Such a decision seems very natural when we remember that the Lord used missionaries from the CanRC to spread the seed of the gospel in Brazil. Still it is wonderful to receive the offer to enter into this relationship as one of the first decisions of these very young churches. In our prayer we commended them to the Lord as they will have to continue to deal with oppression, lack of knowledge and poverty. At the same time, as we have noted before in one of our editorials, it is wonderful to see and hear the Reformed sounds that come from such a relatively young federation. May our Lord grant them abundant blessings and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit as they continue to travel the road of faith with all the struggles and triumphs that will undoubtedly come across that path.

RCUS

It was a wonderful moment at Synod Neerlandia when the CanRC's accepted the offer of Ecclesiastical Fellowship, made in 1997, by the Reformed Churches in the United States (RCUS). It was good to have Rev. G. Syms and elder D. Stelpstra representing those churches in our midst. They have been at our synodical meetings before. They begin to know and appreciate the CanRC. The contact committee report as well as the personal discussions for about a week at synod confirms that there is also good appreciation for the RCUS among the CanRC. Although some significantly different practices remain between the federations, the report as well as discussions with the delegates makes it very clear that the principles in those areas are the same. It can and must be said that the RCUS is a federation experiencing ongoing reformation (doorgaande reformatie). The Canadian Reformed Churches can learn from the dedication and humility displayed by the RCUS in some of the areas of difference.

Of particular note was the fact that in the RCUS not all the congregations meet in worship twice on the Lord's Day. At the same time it became clear that in the RCUS there is great emphasis on

keeping the whole Lord's Day holy. It is not unusual to have a worship service followed by some time of fellowship, catechism instruction and Bible study. In many cases there is also the participation in a meal together. It appears that the practice of one service is a holdover of the impracticality of the long distances some had to travel to church. At the same time it cannot be denied that there are still some instances of Sunday work and going to restaurants for meals. Something that may also need some attention in the CanRC. It is interesting to note that the report of the Comm. for Contact with the Churches in the Americas (CCCA) indicates "The RCUS has an article against the profanation of the Sunday in its constitution" (p. 53). A part of one of the considerations of Synod reads as follows: "The introduction of a second formal worship service is considered desirable, but having one formal worship service does not preclude the RCUS churches from keeping the Lord's Day holy. The report indicates that the Biblical principles of worship, teaching and fellowship are alive and well in the RCUS." (Acts, art. 59, 4.3)

Rev. Syms addressed Synod after the decision to accept the offer Ecclesiastical Fellowship had been made. Elder B. Gortemaker, a member of the Committee for Contact with the RCUS responded to the words of Rev. Syms. Both speeches can be found in the appendices of the Acts of Synod, soon to be available.

URCNA

The contact and discussions with the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) have come to the point that both committees appointed for detailed discussions have reported progress to their respective synods this year. They have decided on a proposed plan of action and have suggested a strict time frame. Synod Neerlandia decided to accept the proposed plan, but has taken the strict time frame away from the agreement. Although Synod did consider time of the essence it also reckoned with the very real possibility that three years might be too constrictive in coming to final federative unity proposals.

The suggested rules for Phase II, called Ecclesiastical Fellowship by the URCNA, were adopted. Synod failed to adopt the term Ecclesiastical Fellowship for this phase even though the rules for Phase II are remarkably similar to our rules for such a relationship and the term is used by the URCNA. In order to deal with some particular areas that need discussion before federative unity, Synod decided to appoint a committee to discuss theological education. A separate committee will deal with discussions toward a mutual church order, while the Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise will serve as our committee to deal with discussions about the song book. These committees will only be considered appointed if and when Synod Escondido (scheduled of June 2001) of the URCNA also adopts Phase II.

After the decisions regarding the URCNA had been approved Rev. Stienstra retired minister of the URCNA and member of their committee for contact spoke words of thankfulness and encouragement. Rev. R. Aasman responded on behalf of Synod.

OPC

With regard to relations with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) Synod decided, once more to offer Ecclesiastical Fellowship. According to the report of the CCCA "there is no need to address again the person, the statements, and the status of Rev. Hofford. In the meantime it would be helpful and much appreciated if our next General Synod would declare unambiguously to reject the

disqualification of office bearers of the OPC as false shepherds, and to distance itself from such labelling..." (page 18 of the report). Synod 1998 had understood there to be an agreement on the matters of fencing the Lord's Table and Confessional Membership between the Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC) and the Committee for Establishment of International Relations (CEIR). However it added some wording to ensure that it was truly understood that a verbal warning was not sufficient fencing of the Lord's Supper Table. At the same time they added a small word to the agreement on Confessional Membership to indicate that the Confessional Membership means accountability of the church member to all the confessions of the church.

Synod Neerlandia did not stray far from the work of Synod Fergus. Rather than alter the words of the agreement between the two committees it went back to the original wording. But it did clarify in its Considerations, which form part of the decision, that the agreement includes the following statement, "The eldership has a responsibility in supervising the admission to the Lord's Supper." The Consideration continues, "There is therefore agreement on the principle, while admittedly there is a difference in practice. Our concern is that both keys of the kingdom be exercised in connection with all participants at the Lord's Table, members as well as guests."

With regard to Confessional Membership Synod considered, in part, "The office bearers of the OPC have a responsibility in dealing with the members of the Church to uphold the doctrine of the Church, and the members, according to this fourth vow [of the OPC Form for Public Profession of Faith - PdB], are accountable to that authority."

In addition to the foregoing the decision to extend Ecclesiastical Fellowship to the OPC also contains the following statement regarding the Church: "Both the CanRC and the OPC reject the legitimacy of the pluriformity of the church (see Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church @ www.opc.org/relations/unity.html)."

Member of the CEIR and retired minister of the OPC, Rev. G.I. Williamson addressed Synod after the decisions regarding the OPC had been made. Rev.J.deGelder, member of the CCOPC responded on behalf of Synod.

OTHER

Other highlights of synod include the following:

Rev. L.Bilkes of the Free Reformed Churches of North America stopped by for an afternoon and addressed Synod on behalf of his church federation. Rev. B.Slomp, advisory member of Synod (being chairman of the Consistory of the hosting church), responded on behalf of Synod.

Regional Synod East overtured Synod to establish a study committee about whether women should vote for office bearers in the local congregations. The main new ground they brought forward was that the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands had recently decided to allow such a practice. It was also pointed out that women have been voting for a long time in the Free Church of Scotland. This overture, thus, falls in line with the Ecclesiastical Fellowship theme. It appears that some in the CanRC want to introduce new practices on the basis that they are present in church federations with which they have that fellowship. Synod decided not to establish such a committee.

Synod mandated all the contact committees with federations who maintain the Westminster Standards to re-introduce the discussions of the "divergencies" between those Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. A listing of those divergences can be found in the Acts of Synod 1971, Appendix, pp. 64-71 and Acts of Synod 1986, p.151.

Synod appointed Rev. G. H. Visscher of Burlington, ON as professor in New Testament Studies to replace the retiring Prof. J. Geerstema.

In response to an appeal from a brother and sister with regard to the use of juice at the Lord's Supper Table, Synod decided "that Regional Synod was incorrect in not interacting more closely with the clear and consistent language of our confessions, which indicate that the norm is to use wine at the Lord's Supper.

Synod lasted ten days in total. A brotherly spirit was maintained throughout. And no amount of praise could sufficiently describe the wonderful care that was taken by the ladies of the Church of Neerlandia to provide for the delegates. May the work of Synod Neerlandia be used by God to further the coming of the kingdom of His Son through the working of the Holy Spirit.

PdB