

Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (3) Controversies then, Controversies Now

The change proposed by the CRC's Task Force for the revision of the Form of Subscription (FOS) is more than updating its language. It raises the question whether or not the proposed change from the FOS to *A Covenant of Ordination for Officebearers in the CRCNA* will help the CRC's distinctive Reformed witness or mute it in our postmodern Western society. The Task Force's argument for the change makes me wonder. Why state that historically the FOS has functioned negatively to "effectively shut down discussion on various confessional issues rather than positively to encourage the ongoing development of confessions in the life of the church?" What basis does the Task Force have for saying, "Office bearers today desire to be more guided and less silenced by the confessional documents?" And the most troubling argument for me is: "By accepting the historic confessions as faithful for their time and place, we will avoid both a hardening of contextualized truth and the fostering of a divisive attitude toward other Christians." Does the Task Force suggest that the CRC will be free from controversy if their proposal is adopted by Synod?

The Roots of Controversies

Who likes controversy and divisions in the church? I don't. I rather write about missions at home and abroad and the glorious hope of the Gospel in a dangerous world. But some times controversy is inescapable out of concern for Biblical truth. In *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (1959) R.B. Kuiper noted, "If there are truths that lie on the periphery of divine revelation, that of the antithesis is not one of them. It lies at the very heart and core of Holy Scripture, and throughout the Bible it receives an emphasis which is tremendous." He was right. There have been controversies since the beginning of the church. Our Lord Himself was a controversialist. He fought for minds and hearts. He warned against false teachers and prophets, who are wolves in sheep clothing, out to destroy the church (Matt. 7:15, 24:4,5). Consequently, although defending the truth may be costly, a church may not be indifferent to false teaching. Dr. John Stott comments, "It is not conducive to the health of the Church to sweep our differences under the carpet or to pretend that all is sweet and light when it is not."

The Apostle Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders has not lost its meaning for today. He told them to be constantly on guard, and to keep watch over themselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Acts 20:28-31). In Ephesus, Timothy was cautioned against accepting the profane babbling of the Gnostics (1 Tim. 6:20,21), which threatened the unity of the church. Paul warned the Galatians against Judaizers throwing them into confusion and perverting the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:8,9). He urged the Corinthians to hold firmly to the word he had preached to them. If not, they would have believed in vain (1 Cor. 15:1,2). And he warned the Colossians against the worshipping of angels (Col. 2:18). These few examples from the Gospels and Paul's epistles show that the church is not a debating society where the latest results of scholar studies are discussed and disputed by academic theologians.

We often seem to forget that the church is not ours, but the Lord's. She is called the body of Christ and His bride. She is the communion of saints commissioned to guard and proclaim the Gospel entrusted to her. Right from the beginning she has always talked about *knowing* the truth, *walking* in and *doing* the truth. In fact, Paul urged Timothy and us to present ourselves to God as workmen who need not be ashamed, "rightly handling the word of truth." In other

words, if the truth is not handled rightly, the church will suffer. And throughout her history, the church has suffered from a wrong handling of the truth of Scripture. "Liberty of doctrine in teaching results in divisions and brings confusion," church historian Dr. John H. Kromminga noted. "It destroys the solidarity of the church, whose hallmark it is to follow her Head Christ in obedience to His Word."

One critical reason for controversy is the church's involvement in a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:12). Don't underestimate the power of the forces of evil! Satan and his minions are real. Satan, the tempter, is God's adversary. His purposes are clearly opposed to the purposes of God. Wherever possible, he seeks to hinder the spread of the Gospel. He was once beautiful and bright, now he hates what is beautiful and bright. He despises God's Word and spews falsehoods. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has Satan say:

I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere;
Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down
Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King.

Whenever we face disputes and controversies, we may well remember that we are involved in the spiritual warfare being waged in the unseen world. Abraham Kuyper once used the metaphor of a curtain to sharpen our concern for this world: "if once the curtain were pulled back, and the spiritual world behind it came into view, it would expose to our spiritual vision a struggle so intense, so convulsive, sweeping everything within its range, that the fiercest battle ever fought on earth would seem, by comparison, a mere game."

Controversies in Early Church

James I. Packer argued that the deep cleavages in Christendom are doctrinal; and the deepest doctrinal cleavages are those which result from disagreement with authority. Radical divergences are only expected when there is no agreement as to the proper grounds for believing anything. The fierce battles about doctrines in the early church are examples when there is no agreement about the teachings of Scripture. I will only mention two prominent conflicts. The Arian controversy of the fourth century, widely regarded as one of the most significant in the history of the Christian church, dealt with a key doctrine pertaining to our salvation. Arius (c.250-c.336) argued that Christ was regarded as a creature, although nevertheless as pre-eminent amongst other creatures. This provoked a hostile response from Anathasius, who argued that Arius' Christ could not redeem fallen humanity. In the end Arianism, the movement associated with Arius, was condemned as heretical. The fifth century monk, Pelagius, argued for constant self-improvement, in the light of the old Testament law and the example of Christ. Pelagianism came to be seen as a religion of human autonomy, which held that human beings are able to take the initiative in their own salvation. His chief opponent, Augustine, reacted forcefully against Pelagianism, insisting upon the priority of the grace of God, from its beginning to the end.

Why did our Lord, the apostles and the early church urge Christians to stand for truth? Because ideas have legs. Beliefs lead to practice. A church that knows its doctrinal boundaries and understands its task, is not only necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel, but also has great value for the life of the believer in its length and depth. As Martin Lloyd Jones put it, "One of the first things you are to learn in the Christian life and warfare is that, if you go wrong in your doctrine, you will go wrong in all aspects of life." In other words, the

Christian faith is more than a consent to certain truths but a response of faith to the Word of God. It means fully trusting the Lord, showing Him our love through doctrinal faithfulness to His Word, following Him without any reservations.

Controversies Then, Controversies Now

The history of the Reformed churches records the tale of numerous controversies and church splits. Even within the conservative family of churches, there is division. J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) played a central role in founding a new denomination in 1936, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). He was noted for his careful conservative scholarship. The logic of Machen's opposition to liberalism led to confrontation within the Princeton Seminary as well as in the Presbyterian Church in the USA. In *What is Faith* [1925], he wrote that the doctrinal struggles at Princeton Seminary resulted in a striking intellectual and spiritual advance. "Some of us discern in all this the work of the Spirit of God...It is out of such questioning that great revivals come. God grant that it may be so today." Professor John Murray (1898-1975), who had joined his former professor, Machen, on the faculty of the newly formed Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote, " Many things for which we stand are unpopular and we lose friends. Sometimes we are tempted to stand for things which the counsel of God does not warrant and we could gain a great deal of popular support by standing for them. We cannot do it, for we must go no further than the counsel of God. The whole counsel of God but nothing more. The counsel of God and nothing less."

The Christian Reformed Church, born out of controversy, has never been immune from it. I will give two examples. First, Dr. Fred H. Klooster, Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, commented in an article (1980) that the Reformed community has generally not been at the forefront of covenant study in recent years. "Fear of new divisions, embarrassment of past separations, and a general doctrinal lethargy appear to have contributed to the neglect of the covenant doctrines by many within the Reformed churches." He therefore pleaded with the theological leaders of the CRC to pay greater attention to the covenant teaching in Scripture. Second, Dr. Harry Boer was vocal in his opposition to the doctrine of reprobation. But his attempt to change the FOS as well as his gravamen against the teaching of reprobation in the Canons of Dort were rejected by the synods of 1977 and 1980.

Guard Against Majoring in Minors

In our society that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, we must guard against the temptation to major on minors. It is difficult enough to stay focussed on what is essential to the Christian faith. Among those who honour the Bible as the infallible Word of God, there have always been honest differences of interpretation. And as John Calvin wrote, "not all articles of true doctrine are of equal weight." (*Institutes* 3.4.2)

In *A Half Century of Theology*, Dr. G.C. Berkouwer warned that the struggle for truth may not be waged for the sake of a fight, but only for the sake of truth. Too often fellow Christians have been deeply hurt by battles over minor issues. If truth cannot be spoken with love, silence should be kept. On the one hand, truth without love is a tinkling cymbal which produces self-righteousness. But on the other hand, love without loyalty to the truth is detrimental for the health of the church. The godly Reformed conservative theologian professor, Dr. H. Bavinck,

was so deeply hurt personally by church conflicts that he repeatedly told his students: "Ordinary politics has usually a dirty side, but church politics always has one." In an article written in 1900, he pointed that *within the confines of our confessional commitment*, differences of opinion are not a curse but a blessing. "Variation of sight, provided that it does not become personal, is not a sign of weakness but of strength, a proof of free, independent study, arriving through one's own research at a confirmed conviction."

In the last part of the 20th century Dr. Francis Schaeffer was a valiant defender of the Reformed faith. He repeatedly stated that we can only address the errant with tears, warning them like a shepherd warns his sheep when they wander away. He believed that if we can't have compassion for the erring, we should remain silent. "What God wants from us is not only doctrinal faithfulness," wrote Schaeffer, "but our love day by day. Not in theory, mind you, but in practice." He insisted that exercising love does not mean accommodating doctrinal errors. Schaeffer argued that the longer error is condoned, the easier it is to compromise the truth. When the integrity of the Gospel and the Body of Christ is in immediate danger, we must have the courage to speak out, call a spade a spade.

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