

## **Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (6) The Past as a Mirror**

The question has been asked: "Is the Christian Reformed Church edging away from its Reformed heritage?" Of course the answer depends on with whom you are talking. Some believe that the *Three Forms of Unity* and their riches are outdated because whatever is four hundred years old cannot have any value for today. Others say, "To stay Reformed we must have a new approach to the confessions." But the confessions are not merely documents from the distant past; the sixteenth century confessional development is still vividly near and meaningful for today. They are the basis for church fellowship and a witness to the world. They also have normative authority.

The historic Reformed churches expected their ministers to be in full agreement with the confessions in preaching and teaching. They wanted to remain Biblical in the strictest sense of the word. That's why they insisted on signing of the Form of Subscription (FOS) by their office bearers. At the Synod of Dort (1618-19) a FOS was drawn up for all the Reformed Churches. It required agreement not only with the catechism and the Belgic confession, but also with the doctrinal interpretation and pronouncements against the Arminians, known as the Canons of Dort. The subscriber to FOS promised not only to reject all errors militating against the doctrines of the Bible as confessed by the churches, but also promised active opposition.

### **The Function of FOS**

At its founding in 1857 the CRC adopted the FOS essentially unchanged from its original draft at the 1619 Synod of Dort. It was accepted as its regulating instrument to keep the CRC orthodox. And FOS has functioned in this manner ever since. When a CRC minister is ordained/installed, he is asked, "Do you subscribe to the doctrinal standards of this church, rejecting all teaching which contradicts them?" The same question is asked when elders and deacons are ordained/installed. All these office bearers are asked to sign the strongly worded FOS. With their signature they promise not only to teach and faithfully defend the doctrinal standards of the church, but also to keep it from error. The *Acts of Synod 1976* notes, "It may be said that the adoption and use of the traditional FOS has been an integral part of the CRC's history as an orthodox, conservative, confessional church." The same Synod also affirmed that FOS is "the instrument for safeguarding the administration of the Word and the government of the church in harmony with the confession." In 1988, Synod adopted some changes to FOS to express the wording in more contemporary language. Donald Sinnema concludes in his study of the historical background of FOS that the CRC retains substantially the same focus as the Synod of Dort, which was the fruit of a concerted Reformed attempt to safeguard the Calvinist orthodoxy of ministers from the threat of Arminianism. Sinnema states, "In retaining this form, the CRC has inherited and preserved the view that ecclesiastical confessions are not only witnesses to doctrinal unity but also standards of doctrinal purity."

## The Task Force

The Task Force for the revision of FOS seems to believe a change toward the confessions is needed. The members argue there must be ongoing reflection and development "as the church constantly seeks to explain what faithfulness to the gospel looks like in this time and place." Therefore, they recommend that FOS should be replaced with a new document called the *Covenant of Ordination*. This title suggests a change in attitude. It speaks of "enablement and participation rather than regulation and silencing." The Task Force reasons that the removal "of the stringent requirement to 'defend' and the removal of 'silencing language', creates "a positive climate in which leaders can discerningly use the complex theological statements of the historic confessions as they continually reflect on the identity of the church in the light of Scripture and its contemporary context."

In the proposed *Covenant of Ordination* the confessions are accepted "as faithful expressions of the church's understanding of the gospel for its time and place [italics mine], which defines our tradition and continues to guide us today." And it says, "We further promise to continually review them in the light of our understanding of the Scriptures." But these changes seem to lead the church in a direction it should hesitate to go. Why? Because the wording and sentiment put too much emphasis on the confessions as historical. As a few CRC pastors observed, "Obviously, every confessional document arises out of a particular set of historical circumstances. However, the power of the confessions is that they speak beyond their time and place and capture timeless truth about the historic Christian faith." And they noted that by asking office bearers to "continually review" the confession "in the light of our understanding of Scripture" does not do justice to the nature of the confessions. They have stood the test of time and rarely ought to be amended. And to be *guided* by the confessions does not necessarily mean to really adhere to them.

I wonder why the Task Force does not refer to previous controversies surrounding FOS in Reformed church history. The revision of FOS in the Netherlands played a significant role in the Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834. As the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK, the Dutch state church) loosened ties to the historic forms of unity by relaxing the extent to which office bearers were obligated to adhere to them, the theological drift caused an exodus of orthodox Christians who continued to value their confessions.

## Synod of Dort 1618-19

What strikes me in the discussion about the revision of FOS is the centuries old controversy surrounding the Canons of Dort. Some have called the Canons too scholastic. Too obscure. Not pastoral. But careful study show they are more pastoral than what many are inclined to think. We have to keep in mind that the Synod of Dort was more than a Dutch gathering. It was truly ecumenical. Representatives from churches in England, Germany, and Switzerland, twenty-six theologians in total, took part in the proceedings. King James of England also supported the synod and showed

interest. No wonder the Canons have had an even greater impact upon the worldwide Reformed community than either the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism.

In the United States, the CRC's sister church, the Reformed Church of America, had its questions about the Canons. In *The Church Speaks; Papers of the Commission on Theology of the Reformed Church in America 1959-1984*, the committee observed, "Our present standards are limited in their applicability to our day by the difference between the historical circumstances in which they arose and those in which we live. We find this particularly true of the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The scholastic form of their polemic, while understandable in their time, renders them relatively ineffective today for teaching and witness." And the RCA committee uses nearly similar language as the CRC Task Force in expressing its attitude toward the confession. "We have tended to look upon our standards as faithful witnesses to the Word to which we give hearty consider, without making them binding upon our consciences as of divine authority." And the language the committee used reminds me again of the reasons for the secession of 1834. "The confessions of the Reformed Church are its response and distinctive witness to the truth of Scripture. They have authority among us as faithful expressions of the Word, and have usefulness among us *insofar* [italics mine] as they are relevant witnesses thereto."

### **FOS and the 1834 Secession**

In my discussions with various people about the conclusions of the Task Force, I repeatedly referred to the controversy in the NHK, which led to the Secession in 1834. Prior to the Secession, the days were dark, especially for those who still knew and loved the Reformed faith. Toleration of liberal doctrines and lack of discipline was the order of the day. The differences between Calvinism and Arminianism were regarded as minor. Accommodation was the pattern for the new age. Orthodox church members began to object to what they perceived as liberal and unorthodox practices in their church.

Dort's FOS remained in use in the NHK for almost two hundred years. In 1816, after the monarchy was restored following the Napoleonic wars, the NHK was reorganized, and a new form of subscription replaced Dort's. The Dort FOS was considered outdated, too narrowminded. The autocratic King Willem I pushed through some drastic changes. However, he had little understanding of Reformed doctrine and still less of church polity and government. The wording of FOS was slightly changed. Instead of the declaration that the three confessional standards "do fully agree with the Word of God," the new version contained a weaker declaration of agreement with "the doctrine, which, in agreement with God's Holy Word, is contained in the accepted forms of unity." There was deliberate ambiguity in the phrase, "which, in agreement with God's Holy Word," to allow a greater freedom on the part of the subscribers. The pledge to FOS could now read as a promise to teach the Reformed faith either *because* it was in full agreement with Holy Scripture or *insofar* as it expressed that agreement. With this ambiguous phrase the door was officially opened to greater deviations from the doctrine contained in the creeds. Instead of restoring the church to creedal health, the changes became a matter of discord. The Secessionists protested the blatant rationalism and liberalism in

the NHK and vigorously objected to the reorganization of the churches. Meanwhile, liberalism multiplied its forces; congregations were rent by schisms. In 1827, Rev. Dirk Moolenaar (1786-1865) charged that some churches left out the most important doctrines of the Reformed Church. He drew attention to the fact that *because* and *insofar as* could have double meaning. He claimed that under the revised FOS with its *insofar as*, even Roman Catholics and Jews could subscribe to it. He warned that the revision would create further unrest and even secession. But his warning was not well received. Some vigorously denied Moolenaar's charge.

In 1835, one of the fiercest defenders of *insofar as* was Donker Curtius, for many years clerk and president of Synod. Curtius, who most likely drafted the form, said that the wording of the 1816 FOS was meant to be ambiguous. He admitted that the change had been made so that a candidate for the ministry could sign the revised FOS even if he did not fully agree with the Standards of the Church. Moolenaar proved to be right. The NHK could not prevent liberalism from entering. Hofstede de Groot (1802-1886), liberal professor at the University of Groningen and a opponent of the Secessionist leaders, declared openly that the Three Forms of Unity no longer had binding authority since 1816. In 1886 an article in *Stemmen voor Waarheid and Vrede* (Voices for Truth and Peace) argued that the church which continues to develop should not be bound to a form many accepted 300 years ago.

### **The Secession: A Return to the Basics**

The Secessionists' purpose was to return to and defend the historical Reformed position from which the NHK had departed. The 1834 the Act of Secession and of Return stated that there can be no fellowship with the NHK until it returns to a true service of the Lord. "We return to the old situation whereby the confession of the church is accepted and maintained, and whereby the church order of Dort is again enforced." They believed all the articles of faith and doctrines contained in these standards fully agreed with God's Word, and strict subscription to them was required by officeholders. They restored the original FOS of Dort in its Synod of Amsterdam in 1836. The Doleantie churches, the result of a second secession led by Abraham Kuyper in 1886, followed the Secessionists in returning to Dort's form of subscription. This form then became used in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) when these two movements united in 1892.

The history of the GKN shows the flexibility of the Dort's FOS. Synod of Utrecht 1905 declared that the subscription to FOS can coincide with broad insight whereby the church is kept from one-sidedness and the road for further development in theology remains open. For example, the GKN took the consequence of this view and altered Article 36 of the Belgic Confession regarding the role of government.

### **Conclusion**

Is it unreasonable to demand that we should subscribe to forms as if in everything they agree with the Word of God? I don't believe it is. Only those who have problems with the

confessions cannot consistently sign this form. We do not stand in judgment over the church and its thinking. We submit ourselves to the communal authority of the church. In 1870, Abraham Kuyper stressed that it is not permissible to separate content from what is allowed according to one's opinion. He warned that we should not be swallowed up by subjective feelings. In other words, we may not interpret FOS according to our own conscience. In the concluding article I will argue that the FOS, at it stands, remains valid and held as true until the moment it can be found in some point contradicting the Word of God.

(conclusion)

Johan D. Tangelder  
Nov, 2007