

## **Confessing Churches in Confusing Times. (7) The Relevance of Form of Subscription**

What does it mean to be Reformed? What future does Reformed theology have? In his essay, *What has happened Theologically in the Christian Reformed Church Since World War II?* (*Calvin Theological Journal*, April 1984) Clarence Douma notes "a loss of vigor and devotion in the defense and appreciation of the distinctively Reformed tenets of our faith." There is, he says, a general reluctance to engage in theological discussion. By theology he means "a serious concern to understand and interpret the Word of God in conformity with our accepted creedal standards."

### **Times Are Changing**

Many claim that Reformed confessions do not address the critical issues of our time. They say, "Yesterday's answers are not relevant for today." It has become fatally easy in our current mental climate to smear creedal assurance, which will have "no truck with" heresy, as "bigoted", "closed-minded", "inflexible", and "narrow". It has even become fashionable to apply such words as "adventurous", "positive", "progressive", "courageous", "visionary", and "creative" to those who challenge Christian orthodoxy. They even suggest that the defenders of the orthodoxy are "frightened" and "negative". In other words, if you don't sail in the same boat as the "progressives" you are no longer considered to be with the times. These attitudes may cause emotional hardship for a pastor who holds to Reformed orthodoxy. He may feel isolated in his own denomination. When he refuses to go along with the flow of the latest ideas, he feels like the odd man out.

### **The Riches of the Reformed Faith**

I can't say that all the latest trends in theology, missiology, etc. have enriched the church. Reformed Christians don't try to be original. We seek to stand in the great traditions and teachings of the Reformation and the early church. I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton's observation in his classic, *Orthodoxy*. He wrote, "I have alluded to an unmeaning phrase to the effect that such and such creed cannot be believed in our age. But, oddly enough, there really is a sense in which a creed, if it is believed at all, can be believed more fixedly in a complex society than in a simple one." This is certainly true of orthodox Reformed theology. It is not sectarian. It has not lost its connection with the ancient church. The Reformers never for one moment believed that they were inventing something new. They believed they were housecleaning, returning to the traditions of the early church and universal-Christian theology.

Do we treasure the riches of the Reformed faith? How well do our elders and deacons know and understand the various biblical doctrines on which the foundation of the church is built? Nowhere is the need of man so deeply seen as in Reformed theology. Man is lost in his sin. Nowhere is the wonder salvation so well stated as in Reformed theology. Its focus is on God Who took the initiative (John 3:16). He reaches out to sinners, offers salvation, hope, and life. That's why Reformed theology is so meaningful for our times.

### **The Confessions: Our Faith Response**

The Reformed confessions are a faith-response to the Word of God. They are like building blocks, each

doctrine mentioned cannot be missed and not one is superfluous. They describe the wonderful redemptive work of God for the salvation of sinners, the marvel of justification by faith and sanctification, the means of grace and the glorification of the saints. They are also a touchstone to determine whether one is true to the doctrines of the ancient church and the Reformation. The 16th and 17th century Reformed church leaders saw themselves as guardians of the "wall of Zion."

We are heirs of the work of the Spirit Who has worked mightily in the church of the past. The authors of the Confessions recognized and took into account what the church has confessed to be truth of the Word of God, and they did so by comparing all their findings with Scriptures themselves and by humbly recognizing that the confession of the church in the past is the fruit of the Spirit of truth. Building on the historic confessions, the church develops that truth more fully as she delves more deeply into the rich mine of the Scriptures. We recognize that throughout the history of the church, changes have been made. But we must guard the congregation for all kinds of experiments whether in worship or whatever. We should always ask: "Is a proposed change in agreement with the expressed will of the King of the Church? Will it serve the true faith or hinder it?"

### **Bound to the Confessions**

But why stress the need for confessions? Is the Bible alone not sufficient for faith and practice? I don't want to be misunderstood. Never should we claim that the confessions have the same authority as the Word of God. Our confessional standards are not on par with the Bible. They are neither infallible nor unchangeable. But we may not succumb to private interpretations of Scripture. The church may not be indifferent to how the Word of God is handled. Throughout the ages, Christians have done some strange things with the Bible. Scripture twisting is not new. That's why the Church has deemed it necessary to draw up creeds and confessions. And they should be accepted as the truth of God by all office-bearers especially until they have been proven to be in error.

The Reformed confessions are based on Scripture, point to Scripture and speak with clarity on its nature and authority. Every doctrinal article is restricted to the content of the Holy Scripture. The *Belgic Confession* states it so beautifully in Article 5, The authority of Scripture – "We receive all the books and these only (the 66 books of the Bible) as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without doubt all things contained in them."

Why do we call ourselves Reformed? What makes us Reformed is not our ethnic background, our nationality, our cultural heritage. What binds us together is a shared theology which has stood the test of time and which is articulated well in the Reformed confessions.

### **Church Discipline**

The church is not a democracy. It may not subject itself to pressure groups who want to steer the congregation in a non-Biblical direction. In our free-spirited culture this is a hard truth to accept. The church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul calls it "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). In other words, the Lord entrusted His Word to the church. The visible church on earth is guided and ruled by revealed teaching.

The Bible says that Paul appointed elders in constituted congregations. They are shepherds and rulers of their flock. They are the watchmen of the church. They must warn against deformation (Act. 20:

28ff.). Hebrews 13:17 exhorts the believers: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account."

It is not by chance that the New Testament urges the church to remain steadfast in the faith, and to keep what has been entrusted to it. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you" (1 Cor. 15:2). Notice that Paul uses the phrase "hold firmly." This is quite different from saying, "Go with the flow. Embrace the latest thinking."

The Bible has much to say about discipline. The apostle Paul uses strong language to state his case. He writes to Titus, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (3:10). The apostolic message is: "The Lord is dishonoured when in the church members act and teach what they think is true." When the church fails to discipline, it contributes to the undermining of the faith. "The true church" notes the *Belgic Confession* "practices church discipline for correcting faults...it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus as the only Head" (Art. 29).

### **Maintain the Form of Subscription (FOS)**

As Reformed churches we confess our faith in the 21st century – with all its challenges, which we must confront. If Confessional theology fades from our memory, it will be difficult for the church's Word proclamation and pastorate, and catechism instruction to remain Reformed. Therefore, I am convinced that this is not the time to either revise FOS or replace it with some other form. The purpose of FOS is clear and to the point. Martin Monsma notes in *The New Revised Church Order Commentary* that FOS – as it came to us from the synod of Dort (1618-19), has not been substantially changed by any of the CRC synods. It consists in the main of (1) a declaration of agreement, (2) a promise to teach and to defend, (3) a promise to reject and refute all errors, (4) a promise to report doubts or changes of mind, and of subjection to examination for just cause. The language of FOS is not obscure. It has been written in such a way that all office-bearers – ministers, elders, and deacons – can read and sign it. And by signing their names they promise to carry on a defensive and an offensive fight for the true doctrine of the Church and the Kingdom. "Note," says Monsma, "that the subscriber here promises not only to reject all errors militating against the doctrine of Holy Write as confessed by the churches but that he promises active opposition." This signing of the FOS is, therefore, a serious matter. It should never become a mere form, a traditional performance. Do the elected office bearers know what they are signing? Monsma suggests that those, for example, who are chosen to office for the first time should be notified ahead of time that they will be expected to sign this document in due season, informing them that if they have any scruples, after carefully reading the Form, that it is then their duty to notify the consistory of their difficulty before their ordination or installation takes place.

When I urge adherence to FOS, I am not arguing for uniformity of thinking. Specific nuances can remain side by side in the church without hindering the binding nature of the confessions. In brotherly love and wisdom, we should aim for clarity. What is fundamental and non-fundamental in the confessions? Where can we agree to disagree and still say, "We are bound by the confessions and can sign FOS with a clear conscience?" Subscribing to FOS, does not mean stifling debate. We will have our differences. If this were not so, why are there more than a dozen orthodox Reformed denominations?

The church is not a debating society. False teachings break unity. When there is unbiblical teaching in

the church, when we hear words from the pulpits which are contrary to the Scriptures and the confessions, then our voices must raise in protest. But in our critical times we can't afford to major on minors! Unity is not identical to uniformity. It does not exclude a variety of expressions of one's faith. Calvin made the distinction between *fundamental* and *secondary* matters. In the *Institutes* he argued that if Christians have any disagreement over matters which are not essential to the faith, they must not cause disorder and rebellion amongst themselves.

## **Conclusion**

So much is said today about the need for outreach, and rightly so. But a meaningful Reformed contribution to outreach in North America depends to a large extent on the fact that we have something distinctive to offer. It would be sad indeed if the Reformed churches forsake their rich theological heritage for the sake of numerical growth. Monsma's warning still rings true for our time. "In time of laxity and doctrinal indifference or in days when undercurrents of error seems to be present, the churches should be very careful not to revise the Form of Subscription to their own hurt."

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