

## Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (4)

### New Creeds?

Do the Reformed churches need new confessions? Are the historic confessions too distant from our time to be relevant for the 21st century? Isn't the faith experience of today's believer different from our forbearers who formulated the confessions? Aren't we constantly facing new perspectives and attitudes? Is it the CRC's sub-cultural-ethnic identity that holds it together? Is the often mentioned "burning of the wooden shoes" the answer for unity and peace? Questions about the confessions are not new. What dogmatic themes and what churchly confessions are not being discussed these days in terms of "new questions"? But what is new is the experience-centered approach to Scripture and doctrine. More and more personal insights are regarded as authoritative simply because "it makes me feel good" or "it gives me a lift." In other words, there appears to be a lack of enthusiasm for confessional Reformed Christianity. I am not saying the church should not even think about new confessions. R.B. Kuiper, stalwart of orthodoxy in the CRC, suggested that a church's confession should, at least in part, be reformulated from time to time. He stated, "Most of them were drawn up in opposition to errors that were prevalent a few centuries ago. It does not follow that they are now outdated, for theological errors have a way of repeating themselves. Yet they should be augmented at times so as to take into account current departures from the faith." ... "Only if a church's standards are constantly improved as to both Scripturalness and contemporary relevance will they continue as a body of living traditions. Otherwise they are sure to degenerate little by little into mere museum pieces – interesting, but in no way normative, records of beliefs and practices of past generations. That has occurred in some erstwhile orthodox churches. May it not happen to the Christian Reformed Church."

There have always been questions about the role of the church in the world and about cooperation by the Reformed community with others who thought differently about things than we do. We should not think that the church in the 21st century is the first one to struggle with questions of faith and uncertainties. One question I struggle with is: How can a Reformed church even think about adopting a common confession? They are more divided, even fragmented, than those of nearly any other confessional tradition. And where will it all end as we plow through what some people call the wilderness of our time? Will the church not drift aimlessly without the anchor of our common confessional foundations? How can the church lead when it is unsure of its theological heritage and unity? In his *The Secular Heresy. The Erosion of the Gospel in the Twentieth Century*, Harry Blamires warns "if the language of doctrinal propositions and of liturgical forms is generally obsolete and irrelevant to our time, then the Christian faith is itself obsolete and has no significance for our generation."

The 20th century record of Reformed Confession making gives the 21st century church little encouragement to develop new ones. Ignatius (d.100 A.D.) described the church "as a choir able to sing in unison and [with] one voice." But recent history of drawing up confessions reveals discord rather than unity in faith. I will mention only two such attempts – the *Auburn Affirmation* and the *Belhar Confession*. Both of them show how

difficult it is to come to a confessional consensus in times of doctrinal uncertainty and denominational controversy.

### **Auburn Affirmation (1924)**

The background of the *Auburn Affirmation* is the controversy in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. It involved such prominent figures as the conservative Dr. J. Gresham Machen and the liberal Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Thanks to a conservative majority, the 1923 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. affirmed the "doctrinal deliverance" of 1910 and 1916, which required all ministerial candidates to accept five "essential and necessary" doctrines: biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, the death of Christ as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and His miracles. In 1924, the *Affirmation* was issued by liberal Presbyterian ministers in opposition to what they believed was a fundamentalist assault on the church's unity. What does the document show? A radically different approach to doctrine and the basis for church unity among Presbyterian conservatives and liberals. The Liberals believed that their differences with conservatives were not over essential matters and that doctrinal agreement was not the most important basis for church unity. Without rejecting the truth of the five doctrines per se, the document distinguished between the *facts of religion* and the *theories* (i.e. the theological formulations devised to explain them). While holding earnestly to the "great facts and doctrines" underlying the affirmation, the liberals argued that the previous assembly had erred in forcing particular theories on the whole church. Thus, the *Affirmation* stated, "All who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them are worthy of all confidence and fellowship." In practice, it meant the widening of the doors for various winds of doctrine. The 1926 general assembly opened the way to greater theological pluralism by declaring that Presbyterianism admits a diversity of views, the limits of which the church, rather than the individual must decide. Ever since then the *Affirmation* has been continually lifted up as a model for the present Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. denomination.

Why do conservatives disagree with the *Affirmation*? It states that the Scriptures never claim to be free from error. It refers to receiving all truth "which from time to time" God causes to break forth from the Scriptures. Hence, Scripture cannot then be a reliable source of God's Word on a consistent basis. Another serious error of the *Affirmation* is that it defines liberty of conscience so broadly that doctrines become reduced to theory. The document says essentially, "the great facts and doctrines" of the faith may be explained by whatever theory we want to use to interpret them. Dr. Paul Legett, pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church, N.J., concludes, "The *Auburn Affirmation* stands neither for fidelity to Reformed doctrine nor true Christian freedom. Its legacy to the church continues to be ambiguity and confusion" (*Theology Matters*, Nov/Dec.2006).

### **The Belhar Confession**

CRC Synod 2005 appointed a committee to revise the Contemporary Testimony and Synod 2006 encouraged the study of the Belhar Confession and its consideration as a

confession in the CRC. I suggest the CRC should not adopt Belhar Confession as her own as it conflicts with the historic Three Forms of Unity.

The history of the *Belhar Confession* shows the reason for caution. Throughout the 1970s, Reformed theologians, working in conjunction with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), gave considerable attention to sociopolitical issues, and especially to human rights. Of primary concern, however, was the struggle against racism and, therefore, apartheid. In its 1982 Ottawa meeting, WARC was challenged to recognize that apartheid is a heresy, contrary to the gospel and inconsistent with the Reformed tradition. Shortly after Ottawa, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa concluded that the burning issue of the day is justice and reconciliation. It formulated that conclusion in the Belhar Confession, which was formally approved by the church in 1986. Significantly, it interprets the Gospel from the liberating perspective of a commitment to the poor. It goes beyond the struggle against apartheid. It states that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is "in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged," who "calls his Church to follow him in this." It confesses: "We believe that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The theologians who worked on the *Belhar Confession* were strongly influenced by the thinking of German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann. His theology of hope gives a much broader vision of reality than a "merely" private version of salvation. He seems more concerned about this life than the life to come. Hence, he stressed the social nature of the Christian faith in the modern world. Moltmann wrote, "From the first to the last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present." For Moltmann, the Bible is not itself revelation and is not verbally inspired. It is a human response to the promises of God.

Moltmann also seems to have much difficulty incorporating any thought of a future judgment as condemnation. If this is so, how can he recite the *Apostles' Creed* in which we confess that Jesus Christ "shall come again to judge the living and the dead?" While we are waiting for the Lord's coming, we must be actively involved in doing justice, helping the poor, etc. But the coming judgment is still a Biblical reality. I am thinking of Dante, who called the world "this little winnowing floor" (*Paradise*, 22:151), alluding to Jesus' warning that at the last judgment the wheat would be winnowed from the chaff. How well has the Belhar Confession been received by various Reformed Churches in South Africa? In the ongoing union talks the place of this confession remains the chief obstacle for unification. A large majority of the delegates to three regional synods of the Dutch Reformed Church are in favour of unification with the other three denominations in the Dutch Reformed family in South Africa. However, the synods meeting in October also heard survey reports that fewer than half of the ministers in the DRC are prepared to accept it as a condition of unity. Those percentages have fallen from 52% willing to accept it in 2004 to 48% in the 2006 survey. In other words, the DRC churches are

divided over a confession which is supposed to unify them. For example, the synods of the West Transvaal and the East Transvaal, in the centre of South Africa, have frankly stated that they want to be under no obligation to accept the *Belhar Confession* as part of a new church order.

### **Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony**

CRC Synod 2005 called for an update of *Our Word Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* because it serves "as a dynamic statement of faith [that] must be periodically reviewed and perhaps revised if it is to speak contemporaneously." But is the *Testimony* a confession? The proposed *A Covenant of Ordination* states, "We accept the historic confessions: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, as well as *Our Word Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, as faithful expressions of the church's understanding of the gospel for its time and place, which define our tradition and continue to guide us today." A key reason for inclusion in the proposed *Covenant of Ordination* is that the Task Force for revision of the *Form of Subscription* (FOS) believes it addresses the culture of our time. They state that the *Testimony* "remains deeply linked to the confessions that preceded it, yet strives to address the context in which we confess our faith today."

But why should the CRC call it a confession when originally it was never meant to be one? Morris N. Greidanus noted in *The Banner* (June 7, 1993), "When the CRC accepted *Our World Belongs to God*, it did so only because the document took a more modest place than a creed; it's called a 'testimony', and it's not one of the forms of unity." Furthermore, how can the church pretend to speak with one voice when there are questions about the content of the proposed revision and its lack of clarity? It has been said by some CRC leaders that questions raised by the *Testimony*, including the proposed revision, reduce its usefulness as a meaningful statement of what the church stands for and as a fitting instrument for conveying such to the world around us. And it has also been pointed out to the committee for the revision of the *Testimony* that the proposed changes are not simply linguistic in nature but have a theological impact. For example, on numerous occasions any reference to the kingship of God and Christ has been removed.

### **Conclusion**

The recent record shows how difficult it is for the church to say "this is what we confess as God's people." And it has always been difficult. *The Helvetic Formula of Consensus* of 1675 observed, "In these lamentable and terrible times we must continually call to mind and hold fast to what the apostle of the people earnestly entrusted to his beloved son Timothy, namely that he should abide in what he had learned and believed and of which he was certain."

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