

V - Creed or Chaos?

British novelist and dramatist Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), chiefly known for her detective fiction, was also a prominent Christian polemicist, battling for truth within the church. In her address *Creed or Chaos?*, delivered on May 4, 1940, Sayers didn't mince words about the need for theology. "It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality," she said, "unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter. It matters enormously." And she noted that "it is necessary to persuade thinking men and women of the vital and intimate connection between the structure of society and the theological doctrines of Christianity." It is, therefore, either Creed or Chaos. Sayers was right. Doctrine and life, "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis" cannot be separated. Yet, we must recognize that doctrine comes before practice. Christian truth comes through revelation. It is God given. This is what Herman Bavinck (1854 -1921) tells us: "In essence, all the truths of the Christian faith come to man from the outside. They are known to him only through revelation, and they become his possession only when he accepts them like a child in faith."

Dorothy Sayers pointed out that most of the ancient creeds were hammered out under pressure of urgent practical necessity to provide an answer to heresy. The struggle for sound doctrine by the Churches of the Reformation was no different from the early Church. In the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort (the Three Forms of Unity), the Dutch Calvinists opposed false doctrine and confessed what they believed to be true on the basis of the Word of God. Hence, the Reformed confessions are a faith-response to the Word of God. They describe the wonderful redemptive work of God for the salvation of sinners, the mystery of election, the marvel of justification by faith and sanctification, the means of grace, and the glorification of the saints. How important are the confessions for the life of the Reformed churches? They are like building blocks, each doctrine mentioned cannot be missed and not one is superfluous. In the confessions, we see how the Holy Spirit leads the church into the truth of Scripture. They also express the unity of the church. And they are used as a touchstone to determine whether one is true to the doctrine of the ancient church and the Reformation. The 16th and 17th centuries Reformed church leaders saw themselves as a guardians of the "walls of Zion." Regretfully, in the eighteenth century, with its worship of reason and its naive optimism, some of them no longer wanted to be bound by the confessions. False doctrines crept into the national Dutch Reformed Church (NHK). Bible doctrines were questioned. But a solid remnant held on to the confessions. They were confronted with the question: Do we accept the confessions as far as or because they are in agreement with Scripture? Can a church, which permits doctrinal latitude, still be called truly Reformed? Those who seceded from the NHK in 1834 didn't think so. They believed in the binding character of the confessions, and were convinced that the latter were in full agreement with Scripture. And so

did the heirs of the Secession movement - the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN).

Confessions and the Church.

The church by its very nature is a confessional church. "We all believe in our heart and confess with our mouths..." These are the first words of the Belgic Confession, which state that this confession expresses communal faith. Christians are not lone rangers. The confessions belong to the church, the body of Christ, and not to individual believers. Consequently, it is not left at the mercy of an individual's idea of what the confessions should mean. The local churches unite themselves under Christ, the Head and according to the rule of Scripture. Historically, when a GKN minister was installed or ordained, he was asked, "Do you subscribe to the doctrinal standards of this church, rejecting all teaching, which contradicts them?" The same question was asked when elders and deacons were ordained. All these office bearers were asked, "to submit to the government and discipline of the church." And after their ordination/installation they were requested to sign the strongly worded Form of Subscription. With their signature they promised not only to teach and faithfully defend the doctrinal standards of the church, but also to keep the church from error. "And if here after any difficulties or different sentiments should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis, and synod that the same may be examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal of being by that very fact suspended from office." At first glance, it seems that all the emphasis is on doctrine. But this was not the intent of the formulators of the Three Forms of Unity. They often said that the most important duty and most beautiful adornment of the church are the godly life. Since faith and godly life cannot be separated, they earnestly sought to teach and guard doctrine. In other words, a confessional church believes that truth matters and must be acted upon. She thinks, lives and worships, and maintains discipline in matters of doctrine and life in terms of its confessions.

For many decades the GKN kept the faith of her forebears. Her unity was rooted in doctrinal agreement as formulated in the historical standards formulated in the Three Forms of Unity. Sadly, some confused unity with uniformity. Confessional unity does not mean that all individual believers must hold the same opinions but that they made a joint commitment. To their own detriment, Reformed believers have not always made this distinction. They didn't always handle doctrinal or church polity controversies too well. Not all lived the faith confessed in the Three Forms of Unity. The godly 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 out that differences of opinion within the confines of our confessional commitment is not a curse but a blessing. "Variation of insight,

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."

Present situation

The question we must address is; why is church discipline no longer exercised in the GKN today? What happened to its confessional unity? A number of factors contributed to her departure from the faith of the Reformed forbears. First of all, the controversies in the 1930's led to a major break within the GKN community. In the 1930's Dr. Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), a professor at the Theological School at Kampen and prolific author, became embroiled in doctrinal disputes about the covenant baptism, and church polity. In 1939, Synod made binding the teachings of presumptive regeneration, a doctrine to which ministers and church members could not ascribe. Synod also breached church order. When the Netherlands entered the Second World War, the doctrinal disputes were not postponed. While the war was raging, Synod demanded that Schilder defend his theology. In vain he asked if the doctrinal disputes could be postponed until the end of the war. But his petition was rejected. In 1944, Synod deposed Schilder and some of his colleagues as well as ministers. The split, resulting from these actions, occasioned the institution of the Reformed Churches (Article 31) Liberated. The agony of this church split created shock waves from which the GKN never recovered. Whenever church discipline was proposed at Synods thereafter, the 1944 tragedy cast its dark shadow over the proceedings. It contributed to the reluctance to remind the parties involved of the promises made when they signed the Form of Subscription. Of course, no Synod ever declared that the binding to the confessions had become a notion of the past. But Christian Renewal readers should not be surprised by the changed attitude toward the confessions. In previous articles I have shown that in many different ways and means the new theologians, who were obsessed with the contemporary scene, had undermined the authority of the Scripture. When the authority of Scripture is undermined, opposition to the binding of the confessions follows. The two go hand in hand. The 1969-70 Synodical report, which dealt with the binding to the confessions, led to an intense debate. Some said that the old confessions could only partially express the faith. Others said that the function and the binding to the creeds didn't concern many church members. Others felt that we should not think that the truth can be saved through formulas. Some said that the confessions had served the church well in the past, but the time had come for a change. Some questioned how we can still confess the providence of God as explained in Lord's Day 10 - after all the horrors mankind experienced in the Second World War. Other felt that Lord's 30, Q.A. 80, which describes the difference between the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass, should be revised. When the 1970 -71 Synod of Sneek refused to discipline Dr. Kuitert and his followers for denying the historicity of Adam and his fall into sin, the GKN became a pluralistic church, free to teach doctrines which clashed with the confessions. When Synod of 1971-72 approved a new Form of Subscription, it

"sanctioned" doctrinal latitude. The binding to the confessions became much more flexible. After this Synod, many began to speak of the "dynamic binding" to the confessions. They claimed that the new dynamic understanding was to be preferred over the static, as living water is to be preferred over frozen ice in a pond. Dr. J. Veenhof observes that this new flexibility favoured ecumenicity. Consequently, the Samen op Weg (Together on the Way) with the Dutch Reformed Church (NH) became a real option. Veenhof also remarked that this new flexibility became necessary due to the increasing diversity of opinions and views among GKN church members. It concerned the question: How can people with all their different views live together in one community? By the end of the twentieth century the GKN had become a pluralistic-dialogue church. In *Theologie op de drempel van 2000* (Theology at the threshold of 2000), Dr. M.E.Brinkman acknowledged that the crisis in GKN didn't pass by the confessions. He declared that the clear confessional profile of the GKN had disappeared. And he notes that the latter is no longer able to reformulate its own confessions.

Conclusion

When a church no longer supervises doctrine and life, she forsakes her Biblical mandate. The church is not a debating society where the latest results of scholarly studies are discussed and disputed by academic theologians. She is the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers, who guard and proclaim the Gospel entrusted to her. A church may not be indifferent to false teachings. She knows that her Lord has warned against false teachers and prophets, who are out to destroy the church (Matt. 7: 15; 24: 4,5). The GKN has allowed false prophets to gain their foothold in her midst. Consequently, she no longer binds herself to the confessions her Reformed forebearers so carefully formulated and courageously defended, even at the cost of martyrdom. Although we are far removed geographically from the Dutch church scene, the older generation of Christian Renewal readers still has an emotional attachment to it. What can we do? We can pray for a reformation and a revival in the Netherlands. And we can learn our own lessons from the dismantling of the GKN. No church/denomination is immune from doctrinal unfaithfulness. 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: 31, 28).