

## **Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (1)**

### **A Covenant of Ordination for Office-bearers in the CRCNA (A Proposal)**

During the year 2007, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) celebrates the 150th anniversary of its founding by immigrants from the Netherlands. Its theological roots are in the evangelical/reformed secession of 1834. When liberalism and Arminianism began to impact the Netherlands Reformed state church, there were those who vigorously spoke against those heresies, while without compromise upholding the Scriptural doctrine of salvation by grace, which is at the very heart of the Reformed faith. From those Secessionists the CRC inherited a confessional Reformed orthodoxy and a strict pattern of Reformed government and discipline. It has three standards of unity, to which all office bearers subscribe. They are the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1619). In 1986 its Synod approved a contemporary testimony on ethical issues of the day entitled *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*. In 1991 Dr. James A. De Jong, noted that it does not share equal status with the three confessions. In 2006, *Exploring Apologetics*, a publication by Christian Schools International, elevated it to a "confessional statement" to help members of the CRC apply their faith to contemporary issues. In recent years the CRC has struggled with issues of Americanization, Canadianization and modernization, wrestling with such questions as congregationalism, evolutionary theory, and women's ordination. This led to significant unrest and the departure of dozens of more "traditional" churches.

### **The Form of Subscription (FOS)**

Since the founding of the CRC, the *Form of Subscription* (FOS), with its origins in the Synod of Dort, functioned to determine to be, and to remain, a confessional church. In 1976, Synod stated, "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." It also said that it "is not intended primarily as the instrument by which the church examines its confessions in the light of Scripture and provides for the orderly revisions of the confessions. It is rather the instrument for safeguarding the administration of the Word and the government of the church in harmony with the confession."

Today, we often hear complaints about the dated language of the confessions. The riches they contain are barely known because many think these 16th-century documents have little value for our time. Seeing the controversy about FOS from this perspective, we can see why the declarations of Synod of 1976 did not satisfy those who questioned its relevance. In 1981, its wording was challenged as being ineffective for use in a cultural situation considerably different from that at the beginning of the CRC. The editor of *The Banner* led the opposition to FOS. In *The Banner* issues of Oct. 26 and Dec., 1981, he declared, "The views of the Reformers are no longer ours. And the kind of thinking that is recorded in the Belgic Confession is no longer functional in the Christian Reformed Church." In the June 27, 1983, issue he argued, "The form of Subscription has become an ecclesiastical yoke by which orthodoxy is to be maintained; and we aren't so sure it is the yoke of Christ. The form functions as a device to keep the lid on. It has paralyzed the teachers of the church." In the

Oct. 28, 1985 issue, he observed, "Even in our church the confessions are losing their hold. The forms of unity fail to give us a common frame of reference for understanding both the Bible and our mission in the world." In the Feb. 13, 1989, issue he opined, "the canons [of Dort] and the rejections ratified in 1618 and 1619 are too complicated for most our church members, including the majority of officebearers, to understand." In response to the criticism, Synod of 1988 did adopt some changes to make the wording of FOS more contemporary.

The 1980s were years of unrest in the CRC. But in 1991 Dr. James De Jong could still observe that while the CRC has openly faced many recent issues, "it has also lately reaffirmed historic positions (the infallibility of Scripture, reprobation, Christ's atonement, the historicity of Genesis) and remains a confessional church."

### **The Rationale for A Revision of FOS**

What I have written so far may seem dry theological jargon, nevertheless the proposals for a change of direction will affect the CRC at large, as well as its educational institutions. Despite the changes in wording to make FOS contemporary and more readable, opposition to it didn't go away. In 2003, Fleetwood CRC, Surrey, B.C., (Classis B.C., South-East) overtured Synod 2004 to study the efficacy of the FOS on the ground that many churches in that classis no longer used the FOS because many individuals had difficulty signing it. The overture noted, "When a tool such as FOS becomes ineffective in our culture and time, a study into the reasons and attempts to once again make it effective is justified." In the same year, Rev. Ken Nydam concluded in his dissertation, *An Historical and Theological Assessment of the Problems with the Form of Subscription in New Church Development in the Christian Reformed Church of North America*, that while all churches want to retain some kind of doctrinal covenant for the CRC, many churches also wonder, "If a document that was originally conceived in a historical context of intra-church skirmishes that had political ramifications can be applied to our contemporary mission environment."

Synod 2005 responded positively to the requests for change. It decided that FOS was due for a revision and a task force be appointed to propose "a liturgically pleasing Form of Subscription that might find more meaningful use in the life of the church." The task force was asked to submit the document to the churches for ideas and suggestions. The grounds adopted by Synod were:

- a. The survey conducted among the churches indicates that a substantial number of churches believe that an update is desirable.
- b. The present form of FOS contains statements that are subject to misinterpretation.
- c. A more contemporary expression of agreement will make the requirements more meaningful.

Synod also 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 CRCNA.

### **The Task Force's Views on FOS**

The task force argues that the many years of conflicted discussion about the FOS in the

church reveal the need for a doctrinal statement with current reality. It believes that the FOS as a regulatory instrument, needed to keep the CRC orthodox, is increasingly being called into question. "Increased cultural and ethnic diversity, the increase in new church plants, and the cultural moment often described as postmodernism are among the factors raising these questions." It believes 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 the confessions in the life of the church. In other words, the FOS has been used to define a standard of purity in the church more than being a witness to unity. The variety of issues with signing the FOS as well as attempts to change it indicate that officebearers today desire to be more guided and less silenced by the confessional documents." Furthermore, the task force argues, "Ironically, it has been under the current FOS's stern watch that a significant and increasing neglect of the confessions has occurred."

### **A Summary of the Task Force's Arguments for Revision**

The historic confessions offer deeply grounded guidance to the church by linking us to the past and reminding us to pay attention to what has been deemed vital in the past.

There must be an ongoing reflection and development as the church constantly seeks to explain what faithfulness to the gospel looks like in its time and space.

Any regulatory instrument that is adopted by the church ought to be an invitation to participate in this ongoing reflection rather than a document that precludes or hinders such reflection.

Historically, the strong emphasis within the FOS on the primacy of the confessions has at times muted the voice of the Scriptures in the life of the church. The restatement of the FOS properly focusses on the primary attention on the Scriptures as the authoritative power of the confessions. That the Gospel comes to believers in particular times and places cannot be overemphasized. The Confessions were written in a time of competing Christian traditions to accentuate differences and to defend against error, thus maintaining the purity of a particular doctrine. Insight gained at those times must not be lost. "By accepting the historic confessions as faithful for their time and place, we will avoid both a hardening of contextualized truth into timeless truth and the fostering of a divisive attitude toward other Christians."

The task force argues that few church leaders can with "integrity state that they agree fully with every jot and tittle of the historical confessions." Some of the reasons cited are: "Issues have included the revelations of ongoing scholarship that do not coincide with earlier understandings, ideas objectionable to modern sensibilities, as well as a growing postmodern sense that one simply cannot, in any definitive fashion, fully subscribe to the understandings from a cultural time and place not ones own."

I believe the most controversial statement by the task force is, "The removal of the stringent requirement to 'defend,' which has been the source of so many troubles, and the removal of silencing language, which has led to many churches and church members simply to ignore the FOS, 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 our church in the light of Scriptures and its contemporary context."

The revised form will include the Contemporary Testimony as it is a "warm expression of the Reformed tradition today, for it remains deeply linked to the confessions that preceded it, yet it strives to address the context in which we confess our faith today."

In conclusion, the task force recommends for consideration to the churches the revised document entitled *Covenant of Ordination* instead of the FOS.

### **A Covenant of Ordination for Officebearers in the CRCNA**

"We the undersigned office bearers of the CRCNA heartily accept the authority of the Word of God as received in the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which reveal the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ, namely the reconciliation of all things in him.

We accept the historic confessions: the Belgic Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, as well as *Our World 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.

We promise with thankfulness for these expressions of faith to be shaped by them in our various callings: preaching, teaching, writing, and serving. We further promise to continually review them in the light of our understanding of Scriptures. Should we any time become convinced that our understanding of the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures has become irreconcilable to the witness of the church as expressed in the above documents, we will communicate our views to the church according to the prescribed procedures and promise to submit to its judgment.

We do this so that the church will remain faithful to, grow in understanding of, and be diligent in living out this witness in all of life to the glory of God."

### **Conclusion**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian theologian and church historian W.G.T. Shedd observed in *Calvinism: Pure & Mixed*: "Denominational honesty consists, first, in a clear unambiguous statement by a church of its doctrinal belief, and, second, in an unequivocal and sincere adoption of it by its members. Both are requisite." Does the proposed Covenant of Ordination meet the needs of the CRCNA in the beginning of the twenty-first century? This is the question I intend to discuss in a series of articles. In doing so, I will focus on the the role of the confessions in the history of the church and today, as well as on the history of the FOS and its function in our time. We are not new on the scene. We stand in the stream of centuries. The past can caution us against error. It can broaden our thinking and help orient us in the contemporary world.

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