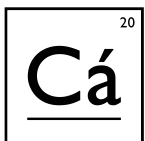


*Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis
in the
Reformed Community Today*



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Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

in the Reformed Community Today

*John Bolt
John Cooper
John B. Hulst
Nelson D. Kloosterman
Gordon J. Spykman
Henry Vander Goot
John Van Dyk*

Edited by John Bolt

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Editor's Preface

With the exception of the first introductory essay on polarization, the essays in this volume were presented at a conference on "Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis," held at Redeemer College, Hamilton, Ontario on May 30-June 1, 1985. The conference was called to explore the problem of polarization in the Christian Reformed community, to come to greater clarity on the reasons for polarization and to promote healing by providing a forum for dialogue and discussion.

The theme "Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis" was chosen because it was believed by the organizers that fundamental differences in understanding the relationship between doctrine and life, faith and works, theology and ethics, are key contributing factors to polarization in the Reformed community. The discussions at the conference and the essays in this volume bear that out. There are important differences among us, not only on important doctrinal issues, but also on the significant question about the relative importance of true doctrine (orthodoxy) and true or right moral and social action (orthopraxis).

We are all agreed that doctrine and life are inseparable; that we are called to *do* the truth as well as *confess* or *believe* the truth. We differ, however, in our perception of the crisis facing the church today and, therefore, of the appropriate response to that crisis. Gordon J. Spykman, serving as spokesman for the Christian Reformed Church's recently written Contemporary Testimony, affirms that the major enemy is SECULARISM! This secularism, which has also "made deep inroads into the life of the Reformed community—so much that many of our people are hardly aware of its pervasive impact upon us"—needs to be countered with the ringing affirmation, "Our World Belongs to God." Hope for unity rests upon a common commitment to do battle, not with one another, but with a common enemy—secularism.

John Van Dyk makes a similar case in tracing the tension between the two complementary New Testament ideals of forbearing love on the one hand and intolerance of alternate worldviews on the other. In his judgment the intellectualizing of doctrine and the institutionalizing of the church, combined with a loss of Kingdom vision, resulted in a crucial shift of emphasis in the early church. The intolerance of alternative worldviews was transferred to intolerance and heresy-hunting within the Christian community itself and forbearance and love disappeared in that community. Hence also our problem with polarization. Van Dyk's solution is a call to recognize the legitimacy of diversity *within* the Christian community, practice greater forbearance and love for fellow Christians, while maintaining resolute opposition to alternative gospels and worldviews.

Both essays suggest, if not state explicitly, that a good measure of the problem of polarization is a consequence of overemphasizing correct doctrine at the expense of a Christian life and that a *common* commitment to *living* a Christian life in direct opposition to non-Christian alternatives, notably SECULARISM, provides hope for greater unity. In other words, both consider the problem to be in some measure an overemphasis on orthodoxy at the expense of orthopraxis and want to tip the scales in the direction of the latter.

Yet there are hints in both essays that the authors acknowledge the complexity and perhaps even the ambiguity of their analysis. Spykman, in a very reflective and revealing passage (p. 80) queries about our priorities as a church: "If our primary problem is secularism, are we expending too much ecclesiastical energy and too many kingdom resources on secondary and tertiary issues? Straining at gnats, while swallowing camels? Fighting a host of church-political battles on several fronts, but losing sight of the big war that's going on in the world?"

But Spykman then asks, "Or, secondly, is it perhaps precisely the other way around. Do we wrestle with these many concrete issues confronting us precisely because we do recognize in them serious symptoms of the secularizing spirit of our age?" Van Dyk, too, reflects that same ambiguity when, after he has insisted that we must not consider all doctrinal difference to be

of alternate significance and that we need to recapture the Apostolic understanding of heresy as "an alternative worldview," he queries: "How can we tell whether a certain viewpoint originates in an alternate worldview or is merely a variation within our own worldview?" (p. 68). Indeed, that is *the* issue at stake.

The other essayists (Bolt, Cooper, Vander Goot, Kloosterman) explore precisely that point. The common thread in these essays is that the current emphasis upon the primacy of praxis (life, ethics, works) is indeed a manifestation of worldviews that run counter to classic, orthodox Christianity and may reflect an unhealthy attitude of doctrinal and confessional indifference. Bolt (in "The Problem of Polarization") argues that a loss of consensus on the question of what constitutes orthodoxy is a key contributing factor to polarization and that recovering *confessional* integrity as the key to orthodoxy is a necessary step to overcoming polarization in the Christian Reformed community. Cooper analyzes the contemporary critique of the traditional concept of truth, finds it wanting, and sets forth the case for a view of truth he calls "biblical realism." Vander Goot carefully analyzes the decision of the 1984 Synod of the CRC to declare Apartheid a heresy and explores the historical antecedents and many serious ramifications of that decision. He pleads for a restrictive understanding of heresy (limited to the institutional church and its confession) and sets forth a case against an omniscient church, a church that, *as church*, feels the need to oppose all that is wrong in the world. Finally, Kloosterman takes a hard, careful look at what is at stake in one of the potentially most divisive issues facing the church: the women-in-office issue. How tolerant can and may the church be? What about conscientious objection? By his clear and passionate presentation Kloosterman forces us to consider with care the limits of toleration in the church.

We may be in agreement that orthodoxy and orthopraxis are inseparable; we do not agree on their exact relationship or relative importance. Is, as the majority of the essayists argue, orthodoxy (right belief, correct confession) primary? Or should orthopraxis receive at least equal, if not primary billing? How one answers that depends on whether one considers the Christian tradition with its emphasis upon the primacy of orthodoxy

to be the problem or the solution, whether one considers the shift in contemporary theology and the church to orthopraxis to be a bane or a blessing. There are no quick, easy answers to that question. The essays in this volume set forth the issues. The solutions offered will undoubtedly fully satisfy no one. That is as it should be. The church must continue to wrestle with these issues. This volume is intended as a starter for such a discussion. The plea in Bolt's article (on "Truth" and "Catholicity") that we recognize the validity of each other's concerns and continue to dialogue rather than excommunicating each other, and Hulst's call for that dialogue to be rooted in and shaped by the Word of God are a fitting conclusion to this volume.

A final word about love and the purity of the church. It is a sad fact that Christian love is often appealed to in an unfair way in order to silence unwelcome questions and unsettling conflicts. It is also an equally sad fact that appeals to "purity" and "truth" often serve as covers for unloving and unchristian behavior in the church. There is perhaps no one who has fought harder for "truth" in the twentieth-century Christian Church than Francis Schaeffer. In his last work before his death, Schaeffer continues to plead for an antithetical posture against those who subvert the faith. Only in this way can Christians "practice the exhibition of the holiness of God." However, as Schaeffer reflects upon the conflicts in the U.S. Presbyterian church earlier this century, he makes an equally eloquent plea for love.

At the same time, however, we must show forth the love of God to those with whom we differ. Fifty years ago in the Presbyterian crisis in the United States, we forgot that. We did not speak with love about those with whom we differed, and we have been paying a price for it ever since. We must love men, including the existential theologians, even if they have given up content entirely. We must deal with them as our neighbors, for Christ gave us the second commandment telling us that we are to love all men as our neighbors.

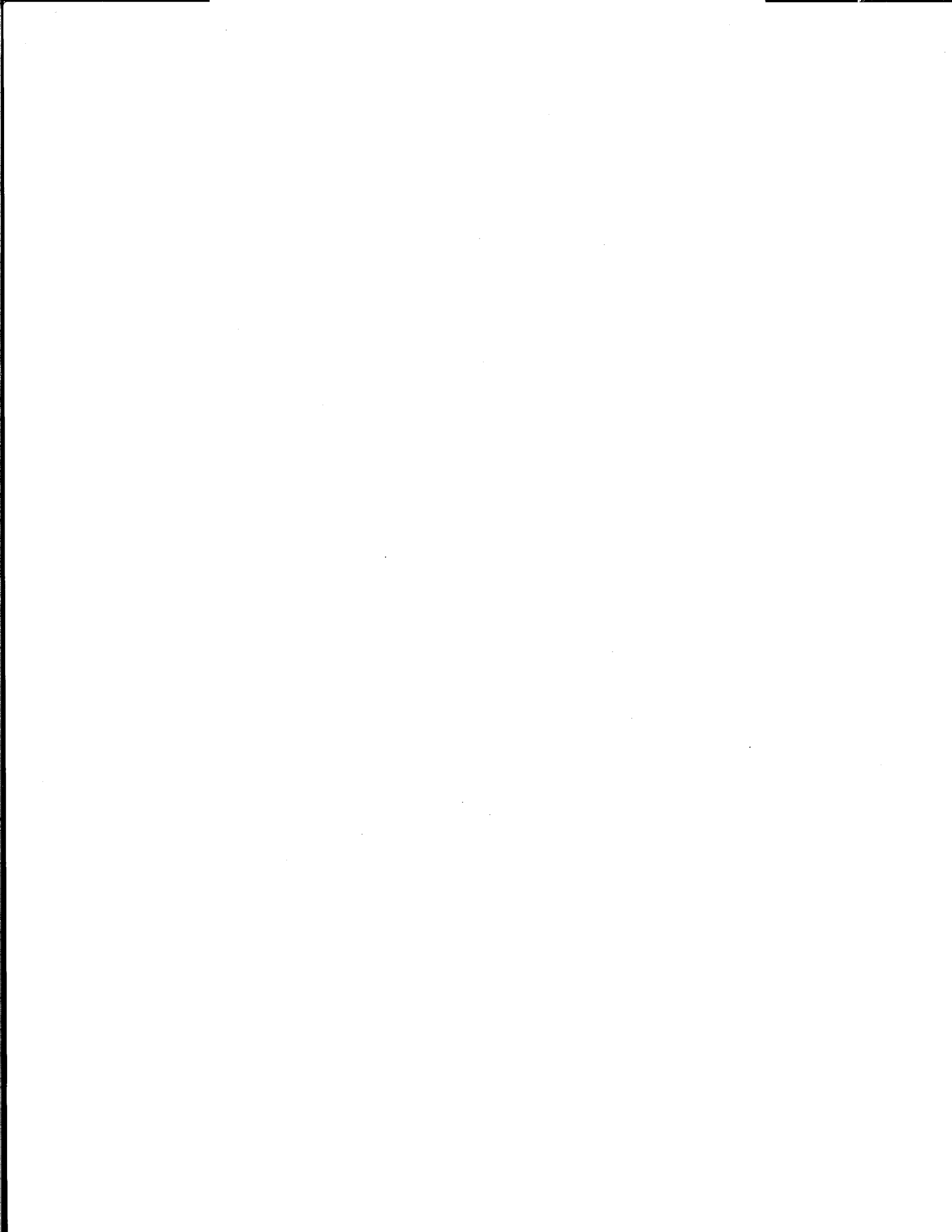
We must stand clearly for the principle of the purity of the visible church, and we must call for the appropriate discipline of those who take a position which is not according to Scripture. But at the same time we must visibly love them as people as we speak and write about them. We must show it before both the church and world. We must say that the liberals are

desperately wrong and that they require discipline in and by the church, but we must do so in terms that show it is not merely the flesh speaking. This is beyond us, but not beyond the work of the Holy Spirit. I regret that years ago we did not do this in the Presbyterian Church; we did not talk of the need to show love as we stood against liberalism. And as the Presbyterian Church was lost, that lack has cost us dearly.¹

May the CRC learn from this and its own history. Love and purity are not mutually exclusive. As Schaeffer continues: "But with prayer, both love and concern for truth can be shown." This volume is sent into the church with prayer and with a plea for prayer. It is numbered as Volume One of a series, entitled *Christian Reformed Perspectives*, because it is the hope and intention of the organizers to make both the conference and a volume such as this one, an annual event.

Notes

1. *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1984), pp. 82-83.



*The Problem of Polarization
in the
Christian Reformed Community¹*

John Bolt

The Reality of Polarization

The reality of polarization in the Christian Reformed Church (hereafter, CRC) was highlighted by a decision of the 1985 CRC Synod to send a pastoral letter to the denomination at large. The opening lines of this letter read as follows:

The Synod of 1985 has requested its officers to address a pastoral letter to all Christian Reformed consistories and congregations. The recent synod was once again faced with the fact that our denomination has been divided on many key issues. Synod noted with deep regret that a divisive spirit within our denomination has made its negative impact upon a united witness to the world on behalf of Christ our Savior.

Perhaps the sharpest polarization is evident in the controversy which revolves around the role of women in the life of God's family.²

It needs to be noted that the word "polarization" refers to a situation which is unhealthy, even sinful. Polarization is not merely a matter of difference of opinion, in fact not even identical with conflict. That there are differences among us is in itself not news. Today's headline issues, notably women-in-office, but also numerous social, economic and political issues such as nuclear weapons, socialism versus capitalism, liberation theology, and even abortion, generate debate and discussion in the same way that sabbath observance, movie attendance and

dancing did in another generation. (The latter still generate discussion but are not the headline issues they once were.) While diversity of opinion is healthy in a community and even conflict can be creative, polarization is destructive. Why?

Polarization is counter-productive because it leads to the formation of "poles" (groups) which regard each other with mutual suspicion and hostility and no longer dialogue and discuss with one another. A healthy community will have the courage to bring even profound differences into the open and wrestle publicly with them. In a polarized community, proponents of one view no longer consider alternate views even discussable and feel compelled to "excommunicate" either the views or persons who hold them. Polarization takes place when groups within a community stop debating with (even shouting at) their opponents and begin to shout primarily at their supporters, to the already converted, with the faint hope that others might overhear. Symptomatic of this in the CRC is the careless, unfair and unchristian way we often consider each other's writing and publications. A form of ideological dismissal has replaced careful attention to reasoned discussion and debate. If questions about sensitive issues appear in certain publications, they are often dismissed by one group; if they appear in another they are ignored by the next group. We often don't listen to one another; we don't discuss. This is no less true of supposedly more open-minded "progressives" than allegedly closed-minded "conservatives."³

It must be observed that this fact of polarization is not unique to the CRC community. The following quotation, which describes the reality of polarization with great clarity, is not about the CRC although it could be:

In the _____ Church today then there is a great danger of in-human and unchristian polarization. The word "polarization" is not very clear. But what we are talking about here should be intelligible. Polarization does not occur merely because there are differences of opinion (in theology, in the Church's practice, in regard to the concrete links between the Christian and the Church on one hand, and secular environment and society on the other, etc.), but because those who hold such opinions form themselves into groups in such a way that they no longer truly live together, pray together, and work together *with* each

other. The individual has to face the dilemma either of belonging to a particular group or being regarded as its enemy, or at least suspected in principle of being hostile; he is forced in each and every question to ally himself with a particular group; only those supporters are promoted who have devoted themselves heart and soul to this particular group; when something new is proposed, the first question is always whether it suits the group or is likely to damage its prestige. We are certainly in danger of this sort of polarization today.

There have always been schools, tendencies, and—if you like—parties, and so on, in the Church. This is inevitable and we need not take it too tragically. But the danger of a stupid and ultimately unfruitful polarization arises from other causes. People are thoughtless and suspicious of each other; they label each other 'reactionary' or 'progressive'; they attack each other, not with relevant arguments, but with outburst of feeling. Each group, each periodical, each newspaper, is simply given wholesale approval or wholesale condemnation. Someone who holds a different opinion is at once assumed by the other to be stupid or wicked, to be reactionary or a modernist out to destroy Christianity. There are those who move only in circles which they feel instinctively to be sympathetic, without first examining them in a critical spirit. What is new is always accepted promptly by some as the last word of supreme wisdom and rejected by others as the greatest danger to Christianity of all time. This is what is happening among us today.⁴

The author is Karl Rahner, the greatest Roman Catholic theologian of this century, and he is describing the situation in the German Roman Catholic Church of more than a decade ago. In a book published in 1973 entitled *Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals* the author opens his volume by referring to what he considers the crisis in the North American church.

It is not difficult to be pessimistic about the pending schism between liberals and evangelicals in the American church. The signs are everywhere of a disquiet that is growing into open dissent. Positions are hardening. Millions of evangelicals are openly expressing their discontent with the so-called "liberal establishment" in the church. Equally adamant are the liberals who warn that the church must not retreat from its involvement in the crucial sociopolitical questions of our time. Although no one has made a systematic survey, there can be

little doubt that the major denominations are presently divided between these two major factions . . . The crisis today is simply that evangelicals and liberals—facing each other daily in their churches, in their denomination, and across interdenominational tables—will not honestly discuss their differences in a mature, Christian manner but choose again and again to go their separate ways.⁵

He then goes on in the same chapter to describe the divisions in the major American denominations.

The divisions in the CRC too, while they may be heightened again today, are not of recent vintage. James Bratt, in his fascinating story of the Dutch Reformed in modern America,⁶ traces some of the deep divisions among us back into the nineteenth century. Furthermore, I am not the first to use the specific word “polarization,” in the CRC context. The Rev. John Vander Ploeg inaugurated his editorship of *Torch and Trumpet* (now *Outlook*) in October 1970 with an editorial, “Polarization—with no Apology” and ran a series of *Outlook* articles from January to May of 1974 advocating polarization as a strategy. For Vander Ploeg, polarization, initially at least, was preferable to secession.

I do not envision polarization as a permanent solution to the conservative’s problem in the CRC but rather as a *prelude* or *precursor* to what ought to follow. For liberals and conservatives to remain in tension under the same denominational roof . . . will eventually become intolerable.⁷

Because these tensions are not unique to the CRC community some of the traditional denominational differences and even animosities have been diminished. “Progressives” in the CRC often find themselves more at home in the social action agencies of liberal churches than among many fellow Reformed Christians. While they may disagree on theology, they do favor similar causes. Similarly, “conservatives” in the CRC gladly join arm-in-arm with Roman Catholics in opposition to abortion and, if they only knew it, would be more comfortable with the socio-economic and political reflection of some Roman Catholic neo-conservatives than they are with some of the pronouncements of the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada or Citizens for Public Justice. A conservative Roman Catholic author, lamenting the state of her post-Vatican II

Church, makes the same point. She speaks of a "back-handed ecumenism" which unites conservative Roman Catholics and Protestants because "they have discovered that they have more in common with each other than they do with their liberal co-religionists." The conservative Roman Catholic discovers to his amazement, "that he is closer in world view to Missouri Synod Lutherans or Christian Reform (*sic!*) Calvinists than to cradle Catholics turned liberal."⁸

What is striking about the polarization that exists in the CRC is that socio-economic and political issues seem every bit as, if not more, responsible for the divisions among us than doctrinal ones such as the authority of Scripture. This is not to deny that there are often significant doctrinal issues at stake in these issues. But, surely those who argue for nuclear disarmament on the basis that "the Lord is our surest defense" and for a redistribution of wealth on the basis of the Sabbath and Jubilee legislation in Leviticus cannot be accused of not taking God's Word seriously. Surely those who would "relativize" the Sermon on the Mount and the Book of Leviticus "realistically" to fit our present situation are every bit as much involved in "hermeneutics" as those who question Paul's prohibition against women in office. The one may be more appropriate and consistent with Biblical givens than the other but the complexity of the issues that divide us ought to caution us against accusing those who differ with us of not really believing and living by God's Word. We must stop accusing those whose *interpretation* of Scripture differs from ours with not being faithful to Scripture.

The Roots of Polarization

Is the polarization in the CRC worse than it was a decade or so ago? I believe it is. Twelve years ago, at my classical examination in British Columbia, I boldly asserted that the "women-in-office" issue would be passé in a few years; our children would consider the exclusion of women from ecclesiastical office in the same way as we now do slavery—a tragic case of injustice. The reasons for my change of heart on the matter are not important here. What is important and striking is that in 1973 no one at

Classis challenged me on that point. There was no fuss, not even from some noted "conservatives." I don't think that would happen today in most CRC classes. Today the "women-in-office issue" has polarized the CRC. The Synod of 1985 was literally flooded with overtures on the matter and felt compelled to send a "pastoral letter" to the CRC. Why? What has happened in those twelve years? Why has the climate become so polarized today? Does the women-in-office issue need to polarize the CRC?

Let me suggest four factors (there may be more) that have had an impact on the CRC.

1. *The Gereformeerde Kerken and the Domino Theory:* The CRC has a longstanding close relationship with the Dutch *Gereformeerde Kerken*. Many CRC members, especially in Canada, are children of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (hereafter, GKN) and lament what they perceive to be growing accommodation to worldly modernism in the GKN. Discussion in the GKN about biblical authority, such ethical issues as abortion, divorce, cohabitation, homosexuality, and nuclear weapons, and a general liberalizing trend in the theology faculties in Amsterdam and Kampen all cause unrest in North America as well as in the Netherlands. But look, some are saying, the CRC too has had its reports on Biblical authority, homosexuality, divorce and war not to mention film, dancing and capital punishment, all of which have broken *new* ground. And the CRC has also had its Dekker case and its Verhey case. It doesn't matter that the CRC report on Biblical authority and CRC *ethical* guidelines (eg. on homosexuality) are quite different than those in the GKN (after all who really reads all those huge reports buried in the acts of Synod) or that we really don't have a Kuitert or Wiersinga in the CRC. There is an impression "out there" in the CRC that we are doing, perhaps in a milder, slower fashion, exactly what the GKN has already done. Like a falling row of dominos the various pillars of our Reformed heritage are toppling one after another. And now we're going to add yet another, namely introduce women in office. Finally, so the argument goes, it's time to take a stand and stop the drift!

2. *The CRC has also changed:* Apart from the items already referred to this is a little harder to pin down. It's just that the CRC of 1985 is not the CRC of 1955. Mention could be made of some obvious external changes such as changes in wor-

ship (far less uniform and formal than 30 years ago); changes in educational material and instruction; changes in social standing and wealth (we're richer, better educated, and more at ease in Canadian and American culture). Consequently, we have also become more "open" to other Christian communities and less sure of our distinctive Reformed character. Our sons and daughters marry other "evangelicals." While this may be a bit vague it is undoubtedly true that there is an unease in the church, even a fear about some of these changes and the future of the CRC as a distinctive church, and that in turn creates a "hold the fort" attitude.

3. *The Growth of a militant, secular feminist movement:* In the last decade or so secular feminism has become increasingly strident. From equality to non-sexist language to freedom of choice (a fancy name for pro-abortion) to advocacy of a homosexual life-style to feminist politics. All of this has not left the church unscathed. Even some Christian theologians now flirt with the "How-can-a-male-savior-possibly-redeem-women?" foolishness. Strident secular feminism in its extreme form is scary and when we consider its implications for marriage and family we do right to oppose its spirit. Once again, the fear arises in the church; are those who favor women-in-office not simply sneaking the camel's nose of feminism into the tent of the church? Once again, a domino theory: today women-in-office, tomorrow God is a mother.

4. *The Neo-Conservative revival in our society:* The question we are considering is this: why is the situation so much more polarized today than it was twelve years ago? Part of the answer is that our whole society has become more polarized. In the last decade there has been a growing and increasingly militant conservative movement especially in politics and education. Education is back to the basics, the ideals of progressivism are under attack and declining. The moral majority movement has helped (twice) to elect a conservative president of the USA. Canada has a new (progressive!) conservative government. Everywhere cherished liberal ideas and ideals are subjected to scrutiny and even ridicule by conservatives. Creationists attack evolutionists; *Real* women battle feminists; advocates of free enterprise and democratic capitalism battle socialists, *and* conservative church members are vigorously defending biblical inerrancy, and saying

“enough is enough” to beleaguered church leaders in almost all churches.⁹ The polarization in the CRC is part of a broader cultural phenomena. Conservatives are angry and fighting back.

This latter fact suggests that while the opposition to women-in-office in general is undoubtedly rooted in a concern to be faithful to Scripture, the *intensity*, the *passion* with which this opposition is being expressed today (an intensity which leads to polarization) is also being influenced by contemporary social and cultural factors. This is not an unimportant point. The push *for* women in office is undoubtedly influenced by the times in which we live; but so is the *zeal* of the opposition against. The women-in-office issue has become a symbol. Here, depending on one’s point of view, it is believed we must hold the line or push forward.

If the polarization in our community is fueled by social *factors* it is also true that socio-economic and political *issues* divide us as much if not more than doctrinal ones. In saying that, I do not suggest that no doctrinal issues are involved in these social issues nor do I mean to imply that all doctrine is really a matter of social ethics. Hardly. Rather it is this: for the most part serious doctrinal discussion is dead in the CRC. Dr. Harry Boer’s confrontation with the Canons of Dort¹⁰ and Rev. Neal Punt’s case for biblical universalism¹¹ to mention just two, really don’t excite most Christian Reformed people the way abortion, nuclear weapons, or women-in-office do. It could be argued that the “women-in-office” controversy is essentially a matter of doctrine or at least church polity but in all fairness it must be granted that it is also a matter of a different reading of the present *social* reality and the social role of women. Again, sincere people read both the social reality and the Scriptures differently.

This fact (that our divisions to a large degree arise out of social, economic and even political differences) ought to make us pause. Do we really want to “excommunicate” someone whose social ethics or politics differs from ours? This, incidentally, is every bit as relevant a question to the “progressives” as it is to the “conservatives” among us. If someone wonders about the wisdom of declaring a particular social philosophy (even one as abhorrent as *apartheid*) as a *heresy* does that automatically mean one is an unchristian racist? Whether from

the right or left, open discussion is often stifled by overt or subtle pressure to accept "self-evident" social and political "truth." It is only when our differences are aired openly and fairly that the community grows in its understanding.

What is needed is greater self-awareness of our own limited perception of all issues. A certain humility is needed to temper the "prophetic" impulse to pontificate on all issues with a self-assured and righteous air.

What Is Orthodoxy?

If it is true, as I have just suggested, that social factors and socio-economic issues have become as controversial as doctrinal matters, we need to consider the possibility that our very understanding of what constitutes Christian Reformed orthodoxy has changed. Are there tensions among us because we no longer agree upon what constitutes the defining essence of the church? Perhaps it is helpful to note, in the first place, that the term orthodoxy (*orthēe doxa*) has a double meaning. It can refer to right doctrine, opinion or belief as well as right honor, glory or worship. The result of this ambiguity is that orthodoxy seen broadly as giving the right honor or glory to God, varies from community to community. Different understandings of what orthodoxy is directly affect ecclesiology because of the variant understandings of truth they imply.¹² Let's consider four of the obvious and dominant views.¹³

1. *Orthodoxy as Institutional Loyalty* The view of traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiology is that the criteria for "right belief" and "right worship" are established by the *magisterium* of the church. This notion that "where the bishops (successors to the apostles) are, there the Church is" (*ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia*) is an ancient one. Ignatius, in his letter to Smyrna writes "wherever the episcopus appears, there let the congregation be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."¹⁴ Cyprian of Carthage in his controversy with the Novatianists argues that the episcopate is the principle of unity and truth in the church. "You ought to know what the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop, and if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in the church . . . The church, which is

Catholic and one, is not cut or divided but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another."¹⁵ In this tradition orthodoxy is defined in terms of fidelity to the *institutional* church established by the apostles and maintained by their successors. It is not surprising thus to hear a papal pronouncement as recent as 1950 claim: "The Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing."¹⁶

2. *Orthodoxy as True Worship* While there are Eastern Orthodox theologians who argue for a modified institutionally-based church unity and the need for a "first bishop"¹⁷ the eastern tradition generally subordinates polity as well as doctrine to worship. The Statement of Ignatius, "where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" is given a liturgical or more particularly a eucharistic rather than institutional significance. It means, according to Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff, "that the Catholic Church is the fullness of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist." He notes that "in the contemporary Orthodox theology of the church, there is a remarkable agreement in focusing ecclesiological models upon the image of the Eucharist—the Mystery in which each local church becomes really and fully the Catholic Church."¹⁸ "Catholicity" is the sign of the presence of *Christ*, and Christ, in His Word and in the mystery of the Eucharist, is present "wherever two or three were gathered in His name (Mt 18:20), in each local community of Christians."¹⁹

This emphasis upon the liturgy providing the all-embracing vision for the Christian community is also found, I believe, in Anglicanism and in the Charismatic movement. Someone has aptly noted that "the Anglican genius is rather of the Byzantine type; primarily a way of worship."²⁰ What primarily unites Anglicanism is not doctrine, not even the episcopate, but the Book of Common Prayer. In a different way, it is the distinctive characteristics or charismatic worship that transcend or at least subordinate *confessional* distinctives.

3. *Orthodoxy as Confessional Integrity* The Protestant Reformation did not deny the importance of "right worship"—"the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ" (*Belgic Confession*, Art. 29) was one of the two chief marks of the true church. Nevertheless because

sacraments were subordinated to the Word of God (the *Belgic Confession* summarized its three marks thus: "in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected," Art. 29),²¹ "right worship" was seen to flow from "right belief" and "right doctrine" rather than the other way around. For Luther in particular, Ignatius' statement, "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" meant "where the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached." "The first and foremost of all, on which everything else depends; is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we bind and absolve sins by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word."²² And, "Since the church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. If it is without the Word, it ceases to be a Church."²³ Similar sentiments can be found in Calvin although there is also a significant shift of emphasis. For Calvin "the Word" is not just the "gospel" of justification by faith but includes the ministry and order of the church.

The church is the pillar of the truth because by its ministry the truth is preserved and spread. God does not himself come down from heaven to us, nor does he daily send angelic messengers to publish his truth, but he uses the labors of pastors whom he had ordained for this purpose. Or, to put it in a more homely way: is not the church the mother of all believers, because she brings them to new birth by the word of God, educates and nourishes them all their life, strengthens them and finally leads them to complete perfection? The church is called the pillar of the truth for the same reason, for the office of administering doctrine which God has put in her hands is the only means for preserving the truth, that it may not pass from the memory of men. In consequence, this commendation applies to the ministry of the Word, for if it is removed God's truth will fall.²⁴

Furthermore in Calvin's vision the Word is norm for the whole of life. As Bavinck notes: "Here (in Calvin) redemption is not merely added onto creation as for Rome; is not a merely soteriological (*godsdiestige*) renewal as for Luther; much less a radically new creation as for the Anabaptists; but a joyful

message of creational renewal. Here the gospel comes to its fullest, to true catholicity."²⁵ In the Reformation tradition orthodoxy is thus essentially a *message* which is believed and confessed; a message incorporating a catholic vision and leading to a catholic, Scriptural practice of life.

4. *Orthodoxy as Orthopraxis* In addition to the two marks of preaching and sacraments the Belgic Confession adds a third: "if Church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin" (Art. 29). The emphasis upon right conduct as the *key* mark of the true church can become exclusive and sectarian as in the Anabaptist and Separatist, Puritan traditions where rigorous holiness of life and excommunication or shunning are practiced. The same is true for Judaism where "orthodoxy" also designates a way of life, conduct, based on the Torah. The "orthodox" community is extremely exclusive. But it can also become an inclusive emphasis as it has in a line which begins with Immanuel Kant and goes through Albrecht Ritschl, Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, Nathan Söderblom and the "Life and Work Movement," right up to liberation theology today. Here, orthodoxy *is* orthopraxis. Orthopraxis constitutes the truth. The church is essentially a moral community. The attractiveness of this position is that it offers a perspective which purports to transcend the highly divisive confessional debates of the past. (Enlightenment moralism, it must be remembered, was a serious attempt to overcome the confessional divisions which led to the wars of religion.) "Doctrine divides; service unites." (Ironically, the opposite is true today. The greatest ecumenical advances in recent years have been doctrinal [e.g. the Lutheran-Catholic discussion on justification, the Lima consultation on baptism] while the "service" arm of the WCC has been the cause of greatest controversy. Nevertheless, the perception remains.) My Lutheran friend and I may disagree about the *extra-calvinisticum* but we both hate the South African government, love the Sandinistas and want to ban the bomb and feed the children of Ethiopia. "Doctrine divides, service unites." Solidarity with the oppressed is more important than quibbling about the "real presence." In fact, among the oppressed is where the "real presence" is to be found today.

Each of these four types of "orthodoxy" have their appropriate, corresponding heresy. There can be little doubt that

by the sixteenth century the term "heretic" had been trivialized by Rome to include anyone who was a critic of the institution of the papacy. As Harold Brown has observed:

During the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it is apparent that the charge of heresy became a tool for the maintenance of ecclesiastical political power rather than for the preservation of pure doctrine. If as notorious a sinner as the Borgia Pope Alexander VI can condemn an ascetic Dominican friar, Savonarola, as a heretic, it is evident that the concept of heresy has lost its old meaning. Because real heresy had become rare within the church, the charge of heresy was bandied about. It came to be considered frivolous. Unfortunately, those who are unable to take heresy seriously will find it difficult to preserve orthodoxy. To preserve the truth, it is necessary to be willing to condemn and repudiate doctrines that contradict it. Unfortunately, nothing in the history of the church has done more to tarnish the name of "orthodoxy" and to make the term "heretic" into a badge of honor than the excesses of church authorities in stamping all those who criticize them, for whatever reason, heretics.²⁶

Late medieval Catholicism tolerated a great deal of doctrinal pluralism.²⁷ If orthodoxy is institutional loyalty, all criticism of that institution is heresy. If orthodoxy is considered basically in liturgical categories, iconoclasm and puritanism in the case of Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism respectively or formalism and forbidding of spontaneity in charismatic fellowships are a form of heresy. If orthodoxy is orthopraxis then apartheid or owning shares in General Motors can be heresies. Finally, if orthodoxy is confessional integrity then heresy is false doctrine.

Polarization: A Suggested Reason and Antidote

This overview helps us, I believe, to understand why there is polarization in the CRC. Until recently there was a common mind in the CRC, not an agreement on all doctrinal issues, but at least a common conviction that orthodoxy meant *confessional* integrity. I'm not so sure that is still so. At the very least it is no longer apparent to many in the CRC that its leadership is still

committed to that conviction. To respond to the concern in the church by a simple "but I still accept the confessions" is not enough. The issue is not whether someone subscribes to the confessions or not but one of how seriously one still takes the *centrality* of confession, of doctrine, of theology, and of preaching. In his excellent essay "What has Happened Theologically to the CRC" Rev. Clarence Boomsma notes that there is not only "a loss of vigor and devotion in the defense and appreciation of the distinctively Reformed tenets of our faith" but that in general "there is little discussion of theology among laypersons today. In fact, strange to say, doctrinal discussion is unpopular even among most ministers."²⁸

If the traditional understanding about the *nature* of orthodoxy is in decline among us is there evidence that the other understandings of orthodoxy I sketched are taking its place? Let me ask a sensitive question: Does the growth of a denominational superstructure and the escalation of a denominational payroll not raise the possibility that institutional loyalty and institutional maintenance (keep those quotas coming!) also begin to play an inordinate role in the CRC? Are we bold when it comes to declaring *someone else's* social and political views as heresy but lack the courage to discuss our own problems for fear of rocking the institutional boat? Or is it the case that critique of apartheid, for example, offers an easier and more certain "truth" than is possible today in theological matters.

How about orthodoxy as liturgical? Is there a burgeoning Oxford Movement among us? In spite of the growing liturgical calendar of the CRC (World Hunger, All Nations, Calvinette and Cadet Sunday, etc.) and isolated churches becoming more "liturgical," I don't see the CRC as a *whole* going "high church."²⁹ On the contrary, the *low* waves of fundamentalism threaten to sweep over us. The net result of going either "high" or "low" is the same, however, namely a decreased emphasis upon the Word proclaimed as the heart of worship.

The most obvious shift that has taken place among us is an increased emphasis upon orthopraxis. An increasing number of the large reports sent to Synod in recent years deal with ethical rather than doctrinal concerns. Apartheid is the only *heresy* that the CRC has ever condemned.

This rapid overview suggests that at least in part, there is

polarization in the CRC because there is no longer a consensus on what *orthodoxy* in its very nature *is*. This is not even yet to speak of a commitment to maintaining it. Is there a solution? Let me sketch a simple answer: We can, I believe, only overcome the polarization that exists among us when there is a deliberate and obvious return to and revitalization of a *confessional* understanding of orthodoxy. That was the position of classic orthodox Christianity and needs to be reaffirmed today. The other approaches to orthodoxy are not without their value; we should not ignore or fail to utilize the many valuable contributions of liturgical catholicity and the social-ethical insights of the Christian tradition. The church, however, is gathered by Christ's Word and Spirit and is based on the historical reality of God's acts in the past, such as the resurrection, which are to be proclaimed, believed and confessed. We are Christians because of what we *confess* not because of what we *do*. Faith without works is dead but works do not *constitute* the truth of the faith.

Why is this so important? Why are doctrine, theology and preaching so crucial? What was behind Zwingli's decision, for example, when he began his ministry in Zurich, to break with the ecclesiastical lectionary and begin a tradition of free-text preaching? The reason is the priority given, also in worship, to *revelation*. Christianity is based on a revelation coming from a God who speaks. The Christian church is not constituted by well-intentional moral *action* nor by *experience* of the holy in worship³⁰ but by a message, revealed to the Apostles and proclaimed to the world. That is why orthodoxy is a *confessional* matter.

I am fully aware that doctrine, confession and theology are never "pure"—that they have been and are influenced by social and political factors. I am aware that doctrine can lead to hot heads and cold hearts; that theology can become scholastic. (I am also, however, not a little embarrassed by the ease with which I once, when I was quite ignorant of theology, tended to dismiss a lot of thoughtful theological reflection as "scholastic.") I do not want to see a "servile repetition of the faith and practice of the past."³¹ It is striking that no less a confessional theologian than Herman Bavinck warned against the danger of a rigid, narrow, intellectualistic doctrinalism (*leerheiligheid*). In a remarkable passage dealing with the

Roman Catholic tendency towards works-righteousness he warns:

Far be it from us to immediately denounce the latter with the protestant judgment that since such piety issues from a false principle—righteousness by works—it is therefore worthless to God. For no matter how much truth that judgment may contain, before we utter it we must remind ourselves that the Catholic righteousness by good works is vastly preferable to a protestant righteousness by good doctrine. At least righteousness by good works benefits one's neighbor, whereas righteousness by good doctrine only produces lovelessness and pride.³²

What we need to do is to restore confession (along with theology and preaching) as an *activity* in the center of our church life. In that activity we are of course informed, guided and normed by the particularity of our historic Reformed Confessions. We have made certain choices and exclusions: our soteriology is decidedly not Arminian, our view of the ascension not Lutheran and our view of baptism not Baptist. Yet within those parameters there is a great measure of freedom *and* our Confessions are not etched in stone; they are reformable. In fact, the very idea of "marks of the Church" clearly implies a principle of self-examination and self-criticism.³³ I am convinced that revitalizing confessional *activity* in the church will make much-needed room for free, creative theological reflection. That will, of course, create tensions of its own but a church which is *actively* discussing and debating common grace, or Neal Punt's Biblical Universalism, or women-in-office!, is a healthier church than one which is indifferent to or prefers not to squabble about what it erroneously considers "trivial" doctrinal matters. Could it be that the difficulty we have today in discussing sensitive, ecclesiastical, doctrinal issues arises from our avoiding such issues until they finally force themselves upon us?

We also need to incorporate into our theological task and our proclamation the needs of our broken world. In the church this can be done best however by prophetic *preaching* (using Amos and Jeremiah as well as Paul), a revived diaconate and, most importantly, by reviving the priesthood of *all* believers.³⁴ Scriptural revelation itself is universal in its vision and claims. Pushing the CRC as a denomination onto the latest ecumenical

social-gospel bandwagon is not the answer. We need to labor with our tradition imaginatively, creatively and with moral courage and cultural sensitivity in order to revitalize confessional and theological interest in the CRC. Institutional loyalty will not save the CRC; liturgical fads, the latest counseling techniques and moral causes will come and go. Only the Word abides and only the pilgrim people of God, setting aside everything but a common commitment to confess the truth of that Word will abide with it. If that vision flows from the Church's Seminary and radiates from the pulpits of the CRC we can dare to hope that our polarization will diminish.

One final note. Polarization takes place when we take ourselves too seriously and fail to "walk humbly before our God." Group formation in the church is often an expression of power-politics and selfish ambition that is sinful and needs to be repented of. Insisting, as I do, upon confessional integrity does not mean a dull uniformity. As Westminster Seminary's Richard Gaffin noted in a recent article, "Humility demands, without abandoning or trivializing my own convictions, a genuine openness to the doctrinal insights others may have, even when they differ from my own." He then adds this application from Paul's words in Philippians 2:

"Considering others better than ourselves" involves making every sympathetic effort to enter into their thinking, especially where they acknowledge a common confessional bond with us, allowing ourselves perhaps to be convinced by their Biblical grounds, and, where we are not convinced, being ready to consider that the problem may still lie with us and our views. "Looking not only to your own, but also to the interests of others" means, among other things, that there is room in the church for diversity, a place for various schools and different special interest groups, but that there is no place for these groups to become polarizing factions, or for a partisanship where one school looks down on or aims to exclude the others. It means that, while there is certainly no place in the church for favoritism and partiality, principles (doctrine) are not more important than people, and that how we deal with each other is itself also a doctrinal issue, a matter of principle.³⁵

To that, Amen and Amen!

Notes

1. The title of this essay is virtually identical to my article, "The Problem of Polarization in the Christian Reformed Church" which appeared simultaneously in the *Calvinist Contact* and *Christian Renewal* of October 19, 1984 and October 22, 1984 respectively. The essay has been completely rewritten for this volume and includes material from a speech given in the London, Ont., (Bethel) and Waterdown, Ont., (Bethel) Christian Reformed Churches, in the spring of 1985, "Does the 'Women-in-Office' Issue Need to Polarize the CRC?" and two addresses delivered at Calvin Theological Seminary for a student-sponsored Special Interest Seminar on April 20, 1985, "Can a Reformed Church Be Both 'True' and 'Catholic'?" and "Is 'Local Option' the Answer to the Problem of Polarization." My sincere thanks to the many who have constructively dialogued with me, in public and in private, on the topic of polarization.
2. *1985 Acts of Synod*, p. 775.
3. Situations of polarization are usually, if inadequately described in terms of "liberal" versus "conservative," "right" versus "left," or "progressive" versus "reactionary." In a response to my article "The Problem of Polarization in the Christian Reformed Church" (see note 1 above), Dr. Bernard Zylstra rightly pointed out such terms are not properly ecclesiastical and suggests that they are in fact humanistic (*Calvinist Contact*, November 30, 1984, p. 4). I largely share Dr. Zylstra's reservations and in my original article deliberately put the terms in quotation marks. However, it must also be noted that it is a fact of life, also in the church, that there is tension between those who wish to "conserve" the Christian tradition of orthodoxy and those who wish to "progress" by charting new courses for the Church. This tension is, I believe, inevitable because the Church must be both true to its past and open to the ongoing leading of the Spirit. *Ecclesia reformata reformanda est*—a Reformed Church must continue to reform. For further discussion of this point see my essay in this volume entitled, "Liberating Secession or Lamentable Schism: Can a Reformed Church Be Both 'Catholic' and 'True'?"
4. Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1974), pp. 38-39.
5. Richard J. Coleman, *Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 13,14. A similar point from a significantly different perspective is made by Harold Lindsell in his two polemical tracts, *The Battle For the Bible* (Grand

- Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) and *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).
6. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed Thought and Experience in a New World: A Study of the Christian Reformed Church and its American Environment 1890-1918* (Kampen: Kok, 1973) demonstrates the same point.
 7. Cited by Bratt, p.216. In a footnote (p.303) Bratt notes that Vander Ploeg's predecessor as editor of the *Torch and Trumpet*, Dr. Peter Y. De Jong, had pleaded for conciliation in one of his last editorials: "Have We Written Each Other Off?" (March 1970).
 8. Anne Roche, *The Gates of Hell* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), pp. 23,15.
 9. For an account of this growing conservative movement see Burton Yale Pines, *Back to Basics* (New York: William Morrow, 1982).
 10. See Harry R. Boer, *The Doctrine of Reprobation in The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
 11. Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
 12. For a thorough discussion of this point see John Cooper's essay in this volume, "The Changing Face of Truth."
 13. For the typology which follows I have been stimulated by James D. Davidson and Gary J. Quinn, "Theological and Sociological Uses of the Concept 'Orthodoxy'," *Review of Religious Research*, XVIII (1976), 74-80.
 14. Cited in R. Newton Flew and Rupert E. Davies, *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (London: Lutterworth, 1950), p. 21.
 15. Cited in Eric G. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), pp. 67-68.
 16. The encyclical *Humani Generis*. Cited by Avery Dulles, "The Church, the Churches, and the Catholic Church," *Theological Studies*, XXXIII (1972), 210.
 17. See John Meyerdorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), especially chapter VII, "The Council of 381 and the Primacy of Constantinople" (pp. 121-142).
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 20. G.S.M. Walker, "Calvin and the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, XVI (1963), 389.
 21. See also *Institutes*, IV. xv. 3-4.
 22. Cited by Paul Avis, "'The True Church' in Reformation Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, XXX (1977), 325.

23. Ibid.
24. *Commentary* on I Tim. 3:15 cited by Paul Avis, p. 329.
25. Herman Bavinck, *Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1968 [1888]), pp. 23-24 (my translation).
26. Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), p. 303.
27. See eg., Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol. 4, Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
28. Clarence Boomsma, "What Has Happened Theologically to the Christian Reformed Church Since World War II?" *Calvin Theological Journal* XIX (April, 1984), 41, 43.
29. In spite of Nicholas Wolterstorff's impassioned appeal for a revitalized liturgy in Protestantism (*Until Peace and Justice Embrace*) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 146-161.
30. Abraham Kuyper nicely contrasts a "liturgical" approach to worship with the Reformed emphasis upon preaching in his *The Antithesis Between Symbolism and Revelation* (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, n.d.).
31. The expression is from John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), p. 222. Cited by Boomsma, p. 48.
32. Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. by Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia, 1980), pp. 36-37.
33. See G.C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, trans. by James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp.11ff.
34. For a further discussion of the universality of the Christian vision and the *limits* of the institutional church's task see my essay, "Church and World: A Trinitarian Perspective," *Calvin Theological Journal*, XVIII (1983), pp. 5-31 and chapter 3, "God the Son, Redemption and Discipleship," in my *Christian and Reformed Today* (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia Press, 1984).
35. Richard B. Gaffin, "On Being Like-Minded," *Presbyterian Journal*, Sept. 4, 1985, pp. 8-9. My thanks to Redeemer College colleague James Payton for calling my attention to this marvelous citation.

The Changing Face of Truth

John Cooper

Introduction

It is a daunting assignment to tackle the topic of truth in a single lecture. But at a conference on orthodoxy and orthopraxis—true believing and true living—the issue simply cannot be avoided. Do the differences among us merely reflect a pluralism legitimate within the bonds of Scripture and the Reformed confessions? Or are some of them due in part to different concepts of truth, reflecting the changing face of truth in our culture? And if our notion of truth is changing, does it bring us closer to Scripture than the traditional view, or does it insidiously undermine the faith and life of the church?

The urgency of such questions has been heightened by developments in the Gereformeerde Kerk in the Netherlands (hereafter, GKN). The publication of *God met ons*, which calls for a “relational” as opposed to the traditional “objective” theory of truth, has followed decisions to tolerate positions in doctrine and life which seem to many of us to go beyond the bounds of Scripture. So the question understandably arises as to what the “relational” view of truth is and whether it has anything to do with the apparent slippage in the GKN’s position. What reasons do they have for rejecting the traditional view of truth?

In this paper I will attempt to erect a framework for addressing these questions. The first section will attempt to rehabilitate and reform the traditional notion of propositional truth within the context of Scripture and a biblical view of the world and human nature which I will call “biblical realism.”

The second section will identify and evaluate the theological and ecclesiastical objections often brought against the traditional concept of truth. The final and longest section will sketch and evaluate the changing conceptions of truth in philosophy with reference to *God met ons* and other contemporary Christian epistemologies.

My thesis throughout is that, although we must be continually reforming our doctrine and our practice according to the Word of God, essential to this is a biblical, Reformed understanding of the traditional notion of truth. Opting for a newer model will not promote biblical reformation, but only hasten our demise.

Scripture and Truth

Biblical Realism

My assigned topic is to wrestle with how the concept of truth has changed in the modern world, not to develop a biblical-reformed theory of truth. There are two reasons, however, why I wish to begin with the latter. First, I owe the reader a statement of the perspective from which I will be analyzing modern concepts of truth. And second, I will defend the thesis that faithfulness to Scripture requires us to retain some form of the traditional notion of propositional truth—a realistic correspondence theory, which will be elaborated below. Since there are so many different ways this theory can be understood (and misunderstood), I must show how I mean to appropriate it from within a biblical perspective, which I call “biblical realism.”

The Bible presents us with the true worldview, an account of how things really are. The loving, powerful, personal, triune God of the Scriptures really exists. He really has created the world and the human race and continues to uphold them along with the natural and normative orders which give them shape. He really has continued to be active in His creation and with His people, moving to redeem them through His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. He really will bring about a new heaven and earth at the end of this age. Much more must be said to articulate the biblical worldview.¹ For present purposes I simply observe that the God

of Scripture is the source of all other reality, that He really has an order for His creation, and that His creatures too are real, although totally dependent upon Him, each with its own existence and nature. Scripture also implies that all of the above are available to human knowledge to degrees and in ways determined by God. But none of the above are dependent for their existence or nature upon the human knowing process. In this way the Bible seems to me to imply an epistemic realism and thus a realistic theory of truth.

To avoid misunderstanding I should also make some remarks on anthropology. Although I defend the importance of orthodoxy and a correspondence theory of truth, I am in no way committed to a scholastic or rationalistic anthropology. In fact with Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck I affirm the biblical notion of the "heart" as the center of human existence. But Calvin,² Kuyper, and Bavinck also hold that the understanding directs the will as these capacities proceed from the heart or soul, i.e. the religious center of existence. Thus for them a proper understanding (which is not merely conceptual) is essential for proper willing and acting. At least some orthodoxy is necessary for orthopraxis.

This way of speaking is clearly consistent with the biblical picture of human nature. For although "out of the heart are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23), it is also the case that we think in our hearts (Proverbs 23:7, for example) and that our thinking can then lead to overt action toward God and neighbor. Consider Isaiah 6:10 where it states that the people might ". . . understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." My point is that affirming the necessity of some proper understanding, which includes some mental grasp of things, for both true faith and obedient living, is perfectly consistent with a biblical anthropology of the "heart." My thesis in no way implies that intellect is the highest or most basic human capacity. In fact I believe that human nature has a number of irreducible, correlative dimensions. This paper focuses on the importance of one of them.

Having sketched the worldview and anthropology of biblical realism, let me make a final point to head off misunderstanding. Any theory of truth is part of a much larger view of man, knowledge, and reality. Thus the specific character

of that theory will be shaped by the larger context into which it is fitted. Since the correspondence theory (which I will more fully define below) states that the truth of human beliefs and assertions is determined by whether they conform to reality, its form will be determined by the concepts of its two *relata*, object and subject, reality and the human being who knows. So, for example, Plato thought that truth in knowledge consists in the correspondence between the purely rational soul and the purely rational eternal forms—his definition of reality. Modern materialists locate the correspondence between a purely material reality and the human thoughts and utterances which are themselves generated by a material object, the brain. And besides Platonism and materialism there are a number of widely diverse philosophies, including Aristotelianism and various types of scholasticism, which are nevertheless forms of realism and endorse the correspondence theory of propositional truth.

I too wish to endorse realism and the correspondence theory, but in the context of a biblically-grounded philosophical vision, not within Platonism, materialism, or scholasticism. It is in this sense that I am proposing a biblical-reformed version of the traditional theory of truth. Just because different systems agree on certain points is no reason to identify them or hold one responsible for the implications of the other. Just because cows, horses, and pigs all have eyes is no reason for thinking that cows are horses or that horses yield bacon. Even if it is true that all scholastics hold the correspondence theory, it does not follow that all correspondence theorists are scholastic. I am not; neither was Bertrand Russell. All collies are dogs, but that doesn't make all dogs collies. I propose to throw out the bath, but keep the baby.

Truth

Now let's turn to the concept of truth in the context of biblical realism. Within the worldview it presents, Scripture uses the terms "true" and "truth" in a number of ways. Most basically, it is God who is true and the source of all truth. First, Scripture repeatedly proclaims that the God who reveals Himself there is the true God, the real or genuine or authentic God, not some human fabrication or idol. In speaking this way, Scripture

is identifying the true and the real, i.e. it is employing what philosophers call the ontological or realistic meaning of truth. Secondly, the Bible often speaks of God as being true, i.e. remaining covenantally faithful, trustworthy, displaying truth. Here Scripture is using the practical-ethical meaning of the term "truth." The Bible uses the same two meanings in speaking of Jesus Christ. He *is* the truth and He *does* the truth. In Scripture, to summarize, truth is basically personal, active, and ethical as well as ontological and understandable. For God is true.

The sorts of truth available to humans in creation, according to the biblical worldview, are totally dependent upon God's revelation and maintenance of the creation order which makes them possible. Here too we find that truth is sometimes equated with the real or genuine as opposed to the counterfeit. We use the ontological meaning of truth in ordinary life when we refer to "true gold" or "a true Dutchman": it's the real thing. Truth is also truth, the faithfulness of one person to another in word and deed. And in Scripture truth is often a property of correct statements, saying what is so. When Jesus says, "truly I say to you . . .," we can be sure that among other things what He means to say is factually correct. He "tells it like it is." In addition one can also speak of the truth of emotions, attitudes, of art, and so forth.³ In God's creation order there are varieties of truth, each with its own nature, essentially related to the others, but not derived from them.

Yet they share a common form or structure. For each kind of truth there is an ordered relation of subject and object or entity and norm, and each has its criterion or standard of "rightness." In meeting that norm or standard, there is an *adequatio* or rightness (cf. *orthos*) or fittingness between the subject and object or entity and norm. What results when truth obtains are faithfulness and trustworthiness, whether we are speaking of true propositions, true actions, or things being true to type.

In summary, propositional truth, the correctness of beliefs and assertions, is just one form of truth, just one aspect of reality to which the term "truth" rightly applies. It is not absolute, but neither is it derived from other kinds of truth in creaturely existence. Propositional truth is not a species of ethical truth, for example. The two are correlative. In this sense I am arguing that retaining a correspondence theory of propositional truth in

the context of biblical realism is essential both to understanding Scripture and living the Christian faith. But propositional truth is obviously inadequate by itself to accomplish those things.

Propositional Truth

For many people, defending the thesis that biblical truth is (in part) propositional is equivalent to defending scholasticism, doctrinalism, and an intellectualistic view of faith. But this is by no means the case. To clear up this misunderstanding I must make a few observations about propositions.

Propositions have sometimes been portrayed as mere intellectual constructs, abstract and lifeless, the clinically precise objects of disengaged, indifferent contemplation. I'm sure that some scientific and mathematical propositions are like this and I suppose that a few people may even have thought that biblical propositions are such abstract entities. But to assume that all propositions are like this is to perpetuate a serious misunderstanding.

Propositions are not merely words or human mental constructions. They are the intelligible structures or meanings of states of affairs.⁴ As such they can be identified, recognized, and grasped by intelligent beings. That $2 + 2 = 4$ is one state of affairs. That lack of oxygen causes human death is another. That unless we believe in Jesus Christ, we cannot be saved is a third. Each has an intelligible meaning; and each can be understood by human beings. Thus there are a subjective, human and an objective, factual aspect to propositional knowledge.

According to the correspondence theory of propositional truth, the one I prefer, truth is a "correspondence" or "adequation" between subject and object, between a person's thoughts, beliefs, and assertions on one hand, and reality—actual states of affairs—on the other, with reality as the norm. If a person affirms what is so, her affirmation is true. If she affirms what is not the case, her affirmation is false. To illustrate: since it is really, factually true that God made a covenant with Abraham, if I believe that God made a covenant with Abraham, my belief is true. If I deny it, my belief is false. The truth or falsehood of human thoughts and assertions is determined by the facts or realities to which they are intended to correspond or refer. That is the traditional view of propositional truth.

It should be apparent by now that propositional truth is not automatically abstract, lifeless, and merely the object of disinterested contemplation. For propositions are about reality in all of its exciting, dynamic diversity. It is not the propositions that we are primarily interested in, but what they are about. Propositions about abstract, dry and lifeless states of affairs will be abstract, dry, and lifeless. But propositions are also about personal, emotional, dynamic, engaged, and response-demanding things as well. There is nothing about propositional truth which denies personal activity, commitment, and involvement in coming to know it. Propositional truth does not imply a spectator view of knowledge. For me to tell my wife that I love her is among other things to assert a true proposition: my love is real and what I tell her corresponds to that reality. But in no way is it a dry, lifeless, static, and abstract idea which I am offering for her indifferent contemplation. It expresses a deeply truthful, emotional, existential, relational, and personal reality and it calls for a response in kind. But my statement still asserts a true proposition.

In the same way, the exciting, response-demanding, dynamic message of Scripture—God's love, His will, our salvation, how then we should live—all of this essentially involves propositional communication. But that in no way implies that the Bible is a textbook of systematic theology or primarily concerned to fill our heads with true ideas. Without some grasp of basic biblical teaching, on the other hand, we can have neither living faith nor a faithful walk. In this sense I defend the basic importance of orthodoxy and propositional truth.

It is important to distinguish propositions from the means by which they are expressed. The proposition is the intelligible aspect of a state of affairs. It can be expressed through language, gestures, symbols, and sometimes even works of art. The fact that God is love can be expressed in different English sentences, in other languages, in sign-language, in symbols, and so forth.

The distinction between language and propositional content is important in interpreting Scripture. First, not every simply declarative sentence can be equated with a teaching of Scripture. Sometimes that is so. But often the relationship between the written text—with its ancient language, strange nuances of

meaning, and different literary forms and structures—and what it means to assert—i.e. its propositional content—is complex and difficult to determine precisely. Affirming that Scripture is propositional does not automatically produce a simplistic view of exegesis and application.

Secondly, the distinction between language and propositions is important because language communicates more than propositions. It commands and questions. It elicits responses of emotion and mood. It motivates and comforts. It evokes praise and prayer. And some passages even cause aesthetic pleasure. Propositional content does not exhaust the Scriptures nor how they grip us. Affirming that the Bible includes true propositions in no way automatically leads to doctrinalism or a reductionistic view of Scripture. Denying altogether that biblical revelation is propositional, however, is tantamount to denying that the Bible contains any correct information about reality at all. I find that position intolerable.

A final observation about propositions is that they need not be theoretically precise. In everyday life we regularly communicate the truth about very complex states of affairs without the precise definition of terms or unambiguous formulation of propositions which are required in legal and theoretical contexts. But ordinary language and everyday experience are no less propositional and the truth of non-theoretical assertions is no less determined by its correspondence to reality, its reference to distinct, identifiable, comprehensible states of affairs. Broadly speaking, understanding a proposition does not require a precise mental picture or the ability to define all terms exhaustively. It only requires the ability to pick out the state of affairs, actual or hypothetical, being referred to.

We need to be aware of these degrees of definition and precision when speaking of biblical orthodoxy. For we all recognize that the biblical message is frequently not theoretically precise, although perfectly true and reliable in ordinary language and religious experience. And while we all insist on biblical orthodoxy, it may well be that there is more than one way of reformulating and systematizing the biblical message when it comes to writing confessional documents. And even if we agree completely in our confessional statements, there may be more than one way of casting those positions as we move to the theoretical

precision of systematic theology. As we dialogue about the definition of orthodoxy and its relation to orthopraxis, we ought to be aware of the possibility that some of the differences among us are expressions of a permissible pluralism within a common commitment to Scripture, the confessions, and a biblically and philosophically adequate concept of truth. Differences among us do not automatically mean that some have abandoned the truth.

Having attempted to locate my own rather traditional view of propositional truth within the varieties of truth as they are presented in Scripture and in the biblical view of reality, I now turn to consider the objections to the traditional view of truth, first as they have arisen from theology and the church, and then its rejection in post-Enlightenment philosophy.

Critique of the Traditional View of Truth: Theology and Church

In this section I will mention some undesirable tendencies within our tradition which are frequently blamed on the old idea of truth. According to that theory, you recall, propositional truth is a correspondence or adequation between subject and object, between a person's thoughts, beliefs, and assertions and reality, with reality as the norm. If a person affirms what is so, her affirmation is true. If she does not, her affirmation is false. However, it is now alleged that this is an exclusively intellectual or rationalistic definition of truth and that it has led our theologians and the church with them into all sorts of aberrations from true Christianity.

Our theologians have been scholastic, it is charged. They have deadened the living Truth of Scripture by reducing it to systems of propositions. They have twisted it by forcing it into the speculative models of neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian ontology. They have used logic to draw the implications of what Scripture asserts beyond what it explicitly says. They have paid little attention either to authentic heart-commitment or to actual Christian living. Christianity has thus been reduced to a contemplated system of speculative ideas. The alleged cause of this deformed orthodoxy is the traditional correspondence theory of truth.

The church has not fared much better, it is charged. Ministers, instead of opening the living Word in preaching, have given dry, irrelevant lectures on Reformed dogmatics. Our catechumens have not been taught the life-giving truths of Scripture but instead have been forced to memorize abstract theological formulas. The center of gravity in our congregational fellowship and personal walk has not been humble piety and thankful living as much as doctrinal and theological purity. In fact we are perfectly capable of splitting friendships, families, congregations, and denominations—not to mention hairs—over jots and tittles of dogmatic precision. A central reason why all of this has happened, according to this account, is that we operate with a propositional rather than a biblical notion of truth.

My first response to these charges is that to a significant extent they are crude caricatures. The whole of Reformed orthodoxy is not a scholastic or speculative distortion of Scripture. I, for example, do not find the Canons of Dort to be the product of mere scholasticism. Furthermore, I know of no major scholastic or Reformed theologian from Thomas Aquinas on who held that truth is propositional but not also ethical, that true and saving faith consists merely in intellectual assent to dogmatic propositions, or that God is to be contemplated but not loved and obeyed. And none thought that knowledge of systematic theology, as opposed to the simple truths of the Gospel, is necessary for saving faith and obedient life. I do not endorse scholasticism, but I do wish to defend it from misrepresentation. And one can hardly read the theology of Kuyper or Bavinck and write them off as cold intellectualists who distort Scripture. But they held the traditional notion of truth.

The allegations about our preaching and church life are also overgeneralizations. Far from all our preaching has been mere doctrinalism. Not nearly have all of our personal and congregational energies been devoted to orthodoxy as opposed to genuine piety and Christian living. It is simply false that most of our young people have been led to confuse mere head-knowledge with true and saving faith.

However, to the extent that these charges are not overstatements, to that extent we must repent and reform our ways. Some of our theology is scholastic and speculative. Some

of our preaching has been doctrinalistic. We have sometimes emphasized orthodoxy to the neglect of other obligations. Some of our people have been alienated and deeply hurt over doctrinal issues because they were treated in a way which the Gospel does not even permit towards unbelievers and enemies. There are people who were allowed to make profession of faith without a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ because, although they knew the Catechism, no one asked them if they loved and trusted the Lord. For all these things we must repent, ask God's forgiveness, and mend our communal ways.

But now I ask the question: what have all of these real and imagined sins to do with the traditional view of truth? How is simply affirming that our beliefs must conform to reality the cause of intellectualism and doctrinalism? I do not believe that the illness has been correctly diagnosed. It is not the correspondence theory of truth or the traditional subject-object distinction or anything of the sort which has caused intellectualism and doctrinalism. Rather, it was a worldview and anthropology which were too intellectualistic. It was an overestimation, reminiscent of Greek philosophy, of the centrality and power of theoretical reason or intellect in human life and a doctrinalistic view of Scripture. Those assumptions would obviously motivate one to concentrate on collecting true propositions. But merely holding that true propositions reflect reality could never by itself lead to rationalism or doctrinalism or an intellectualistic worldview. I have demonstrated above the difference between this theory of truth and the various systems which endorse it. One could even hold that all truth is propositional, which neither the scholastics nor I do, and still affirm that it only has a small part in Christian life, that loving God is central, that doing good works follows next, and that assenting to true propositions is a poor third. Propositional truth does not entail doctrinalism. By the same token, rejecting the traditional idea of truth does not protect one from intellectualism. There is plenty of doctrinalism among contemporary Marxists, pragmatists, and existentialists. The point is that the subject-object distinction and the correspondence theory of truth *per suos* are demonstrably not the causes of our tradition's doctrinalism. So rejecting them is not the cure. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough.

Critique of the Traditional View of Truth: Philosophy

The Changing Face of Truth

Perhaps those who reject the traditional view of truth do not do so for religious or theological reasons, but because they find it philosophically untenable, as *God met ons* suggests. So I will survey the various theories of propositional truth, i.e. answers to the question "What makes a proposition true?"

The dominant theory—unquestioned until the late eighteenth century, still widely-held today, and most like the common view in ordinary life—is the correspondence theory. An assertion, belief, or proposition is true if and only if it states the case—conforms to what is real. My belief that $12 \times 12 = 144$ is true only if $12 \times 12 = 144$. My statement that Bill loves Mary is true if and only if in fact Bill loves Mary. However correspondence is defined philosophically, this view implies that there are persons, actions, things, events, and norms constituting various states of affairs independent of the knower which are the standards by which the truth of his beliefs and assertions about them are to be judged.

Thus the correspondence theory is an objectivist theory in the sense that reality and truth are neither dependent upon nor constituted by the subjective process of knowing. Here "objectivism" is no more than a synonym for "realism." The correspondence theory is not necessarily objectivistic if that means treating everything it seeks to know as inert, passive, abstract objects or denying the involvement of subjective factors such as beliefs, interests, and actions in the knowing process. Critics of the correspondence theory and the subject-object distinction frequently confuse the two senses of "objective." They claim, for example, that using the subject-object distinction with reference to God, other persons, or the Bible is inappropriate because they are not passive, inert objects, but powerful, dynamic partners in dialogue. This charge sticks only to the second sense of objective, not the first. But the correspondence theory *per se* is committed only to the first sense, i.e. to realism: God, other persons, and the Bible are dynamic realities, make claims on me, and in-

volve my subjectivity, but their existence, nature, and truth are not constituted for me by my knowing or relating to them. Those who confuse these two cases of "objective" misrepresent the correspondence theory.

The main genuine problem with the correspondence view is that ultimately there is no way to verify or "prove" the correspondence between one's beliefs and the way things are. We can only ever check one experience of reality over against another, never compare our experience with reality as it is "in itself." Hume and Kant forced this issue in modern epistemology.

Of course this does not refute the correspondence theory. It just shows that absolute certainty about the correspondence cannot be strictly demonstrated. Kant held out for certainty and gave up this theory of truth. Thomas Reid maintained his realism and judged the demand for certainty to be too extravagant and unnecessary for actual human life.

But philosophy mainly followed Kant, giving up realism and the correspondence theory. Since we are locked within the system of possible experiences, truth and knowledge must be redefined accordingly. Thus arises the *coherence theory*: a proposition is true if and only if it is consistent with and somehow implied by all the other related propositions within the system of beliefs. Just as each piece in a jig-saw puzzle must have the shape and pattern it does because of the neighboring pieces, so an individual proposition must be what it is and fit where it does, given the whole system of beliefs. That fitting or coherence within the system, not a correspondence to external reality, is what makes it true. This theory is therefore called "coherentism."

But coherence theorists did not automatically give up claims to reality. German idealism jettisoned Kant's "thing-in-itself" but quickly led to Hegel's Absolute Idealism. Here one goes beyond claiming mere correspondence between thought and reality to affirming their ultimate coincidence or identity: thought and being are one. This absolute standpoint is also required by coherentism to guarantee the certainty of knowledge against relativism. For there are a number of belief-systems which are internally coherent and consistent with experience, but which are incompatible with one another. If truth consists mere-

ly in coherence, then we would have various conflicting systems of truth, and relativism results. Hegel, neo-idealists such as Bradley, and Husserl in his transcendental phenomenology all expended heroic efforts to gain access to the absolute standpoint. But all have demonstrably failed. Certain linguistic philosophers of the twentieth century—Cassirer, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, some structuralists—have continued the coherentist project, substituting living language for evolving ideas as the basic constitutive factor in the human experience of reality.

In passing I cannot resist an aside about coherentism in our own Reformed tradition. In coherentist epistemology the meaning and truth of individual propositions are determined by the system as a whole. If one now adds that all systems rest on ultimate presuppositions which determine their truth and meaning, then the truth and meaning of each individual proposition is relative to the presuppositions. This leads to questions like “how can an unbeliever even know that $2 + 2 = 4$?” and generates worries that changing one doctrine will alter one’s whole system. My point here is neither to praise nor blame this position, but merely to locate it within the field of epistemology. Our discussions of the antithesis do involve epistemological assumptions borrowed from the history of philosophy.

But back to the topic. The failure of absolute idealism, coupled with a loss of faith in reason and devastating critiques of the spectator view of knowledge, has given rise to a number of non-cognitivist or instrumentalist theories of truth—mainly Marxism, pragmatism, and existentialism. These theories do not deny that there is propositional truth, but reject the view that it consists in proper relations between ideas and reality or in relations among ideas themselves. Rather, the truth of propositions consists in their value or role in promoting some non-cognitive goal or dimension of human existence, such as the practical, emotional, interpersonal, or perhaps even religious. Furthermore, truth is not antecedently objectively there, but is constituted or occurs or is actualized in relation to the non-cognitive dimension of life in question. This applies to the truth of scientific, moral, worldview, and religious beliefs alike. The primacy of intellect is rejected in favor of some other experience or activity and the truth of beliefs is finally determined by their role in life.

Thus according to pragmatism, first we encounter problems in science and in life. Then we think of solutions which, as Dewey said, “. . . if they succeed in their office, are reliable, sound, valid, good, and true.”⁵ In Marxism, the truth of our ideology is ultimately determined by our socio-economic station and commitment. As Lenin was fond of saying, “What is true is what advances the revolution.” In existentialism, the truth of ideas is ultimately derived from “fundamental encounter,” either of my own mortality and finitude (Heidegger, Sartre) or the significant Thou (Buber, Binswanger), and is vindicated only if conducive to authentic existence, whatever that is. As William Barrett writes of Heidegger: “Truth comes to be, in short, only with the *man* who is true.”⁶ For contemporary noncognitivists, in the terminology of this conference, there can be no orthodoxy without a basic orthopraxis or orthoexperience of some kind. Much contemporary theology has adopted these theories of truth.

The primacy of action over thought is apparent already in Rousseau and Hume and in Kant's designation of moral agency as the locus where the ultimate truth about God, self, and world is disclosed. Following Kant, many philosophers and theologians, including some pragmatists, Marxists, and existentialists, have adopted a sort of “two-truth” theory. Science tells us the real, factual, objective truth about ourselves and the world, what we are and how we function. But there is another dimension—the realm of meanings, values, and purposes—which is revealed through non-cognitive experience. For Schleiermacher it is religious feeling, for Schelling art and myth, for Otto and Troeltsch—religious experience, for Tillich—basic symbols. This realm contains no ontic or factual truths about the world, but discloses its true ontological, moral, or religious significance.

Contemporary theology and biblical scholarship are deeply rooted in the two-truth theory. Science, including biblical criticism, is taken to reveal the factual truth about the universe, about the history of Israel and life of Jesus, and about the composition of the Bible. Very often the apparently factual assertions in the Bible about God, His will, how salvation comes about, and about historical occurrences are strictly speaking false, according to this view, the products of tradition and a now

obsolete world-picture. But that does not matter. For it is the religious significance and value of human life projected by the biblical text which are the content of our faith. And those beliefs are compatible with the modern worldview, given some reinterpretation. The demythologizing project of Rudolf Bultmann is a clear example of the two-truth theory in action.

Excursus: God Met Ons

This is the place for me to make some remarks about *God met ons*. It proposes that we reject both objective and subjective theories of truth in favor of a "relational" view. By objective theories it appears to mean realistic and correspondence theories. By subjective theories it means roughly what I have called "non-cognitivism." Further, it rejects attempts, I suppose like Kierkegaard's, which seek to combine subjective involvement and metaphysical objectivity. Instead it proposes a relational view according to which "truth always occurs in a relationship of man and something else."⁷

I cannot present the entire case in this essay, and what follows is offered tentatively, but my hunch is that this view owes much to contemporary hermeneutical philosophy as developed by Heidegger and especially Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. It has been worked out in theology most fully by Fuchs and Ebeling. There is a strong resemblance in the criticism of both objectivism and subjectivism, as well as in the proposed relational view of truth. For Gadamer, the truth of a text is actualized in the I-Thou dialogue the reader has with it. Truth is not located in the text or what it says or refers to, but it is an event which occurs in the authentic appropriation of the text. Both in what it rejects and in what it recommends, this seems exactly what *God met ons* is proposing, as clearly as I can make out. I do not imply that it thereby endorses either the theology of the new hermeneutic or its attitude toward higher criticism. Nor am I suggesting that the problems in the GKN are due to this theory of truth. I leave those matters to others to judge.

What I do want to argue is that this is crucially different than the traditional view, not just a reformation of it. The traditional view locates the criterion of truth for understanding and obeying Scripture in what Scripture itself teaches. The

understanding and appropriation process gains access to truth, but in no way constitutes or shapes it. The message of Scripture as such is true whether I understand and believe it or not. It must shape me, not I it. But on the relational view, truth occurs *within* the dialogical appropriation process between text and reader. Although the text and its intended message may never change, readers and their perspectives do. Thus the relationship between readers and text will change and, located within that relationship, so will the truth disclosed in Bible-reading. The doors of relativism are wide open, no matter how vehemently *God met ons* denies it. If my tentative diagnosis of the relational view is correct, it is an illness which ought to be quarantined while the patient is tenderly cared for. I believe we can learn a great deal about the interpretive process from contemporary hermeneutics, but we ought to remain highly critical of its view of truth.

Response to Christian Versions of the New Theories

Time prevents me from critically engaging the new theories of truth as such. For the purposes of this conference I will instead address some modern-sounding maxims I hear among evangelical and Reformed people who otherwise reject pragmatism, Marxism, existentialism, and the new hermeneutic. One such maxim is in the "truth is troth" family, the claim that there can be no orthodoxy without orthopraxis. Another is of the "no head-knowledge without heart-knowledge" variety: there can be no orthodoxy without the ortho-encounter of saving faith.

The first thing to notice about these maxims is their ambiguity: they harbor a confusion or equivocation of two meanings of "cannot"—impermissibility and impossibility. Do they mean to say we *should* not have orthodoxy without true faith and right living? Or do they make the stronger claim that orthodoxy is flatly impossible without true faith and right living? The former maxim is a call to true religion which the tradition has always voiced. The latter is an epistemological thesis. Those who are making the epistemological claim can usually be identified by their rhetoric and polemics against traditional epistemology and theories of truth. I wish to endorse true religion but refute this sort of epistemology.

My critique of the new Christian epistemologies will be first to show that they comport poorly with the facts and then to show that their defenders don't practice what they preach anyway.

Let's first look at the factual adequacy of the claim that orthopraxis is necessary for orthodoxy: truth in action is necessary for truth in teaching. Let's test this. Orthodoxy teaches that we must love our neighbors as ourselves. Orthopraxis is actually loving our neighbors. If orthopraxis is epistemically necessary for orthodoxy, then unless we actually love our neighbors, either it is not true that we ought to love our neighbors or at least we cannot know that we ought to love our neighbors. But this is patently false according to experience and according to Scripture. For the commands of the Lord are true and can be known even by those who disobey them. The epistemological maxim fails. Test for yourself the following implication of the Christology of Jon Sobrino, a liberation theologian: "Epistemologically the resurrection becomes truth when one acts as if it were true . . ."⁸

If the defender of the epistemological maxim replies that knowing God just *is* obeying God, fine. The Bible sometimes speaks of knowledge this way. But now knowledge is identical with orthopraxis and the maxim thus becomes a tautology: there can be no orthopraxis without orthopraxis. The biblical point, however, is that true religion essentially involves obedience. Correct doctrine and ritual are not enough. That Scripture sometimes uses "knowledge" in the sense of right action does not mean it identifies orthodoxy with orthopraxis nor does it imply that only the obedient are aware of God and His demands. Again in this case, the maxim stands as a description of true religion, but not as a piece of epistemology. Very interesting to me is the fact that it is possible to write liberation theology well enough to be published by Orbis Books without ever engaging in a liberating act or even appearing in life-style to side with the poor. Even there orthodoxy appears possible without orthopraxis.

Another standard defense of the primacy of praxis is the observation that we usually gain knowledge of how to do things only by doing them. I learn to swim by swimming, not thinking about swimming. I learn what justice is only by doing justice.

Now of course we learn to do things by doing them. But this fails to provide support for the primacy of praxis maxim. For it fails to distinguish *knowing what* something is from *knowing how* to make it work. It runs together, in other words, the ability to recognize an action and the ability to perform it. Certainly we can *know what* swimming and justice are and *know that* we ought to engage in them without *knowing how* to swim or how to bring about justice in a particular situation. Once the argument is analyzed, it is again apparent that orthodoxy ("knowing what" and "knowing that") does not necessarily depend on orthopraxis ("knowing how and doing it").

But perhaps the orthopraxist will respond that it is only through *doing* that we achieve *knowing* of any sort at all. In order to know what 165×23 is, I have to perform a calculation. In order to know how to spell "orthopraxis," I must consult the dictionary. In order to know the color of your shirt, I must look at it. So all knowing depends upon activity or perhaps even is itself a form of activity.

If this is all that is meant by the primacy of praxis, we have no dispute at all. The entire tradition, including Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes, would agree. They all emphasized that gaining knowledge necessarily involves disciplined activity as a means. But the orthopraxist wants more, as we have seen. He wants the *truth* of the knowledge to be generated by the activity. And there we do have an important disagreement in which the orthopraxist's maxim seems false.

There is one obvious sense in which actions can make propositions true: when they bring about what is asserted to be the case; when they cause reality to correspond to belief. Thus I can make the claim "I am swimming" true by swimming. I can make your belief that I am kind true by being kind. But again, this is not the issue and has never been denied by traditional epistemologists. It only reconfirms the correspondence theory.

Let's turn then to the other popular saying: orthodoxy presupposes ortho-encounter—no head knowledge without personal knowledge. Although correctly describing true religion, this maxim, like the other, is demonstrably false as an epistemological thesis. For I may come to know a great deal about a person through reading, observation, or hear-say without our ever meeting. If we do meet, I may correctly say, "I

feel as though I already know you." Then I see for myself and may learn even more from our encounter. But I certainly had true beliefs about this person before our meeting. In short, I may know all about a person without knowing that individual personally. (Buber and Brunner force the exclusive I-Thou/I-It distinction upon us so cleverly that we don't even consider the obvious I-He/She relation.) Further, the possible epistemic independence of head-knowledge from heart-knowledge is painfully obvious in those poor souls who do embrace orthodoxy without personal, saving faith. It is evident also that some people and even the devils themselves understand Christian doctrine flawlessly and nevertheless hate it. All of these cases are counterexamples to the epistemological thesis that ortho-encounter is a necessary condition of orthodoxy. That thesis appears refuted. Of course it is still true that normative religion grounds correct belief in authentic faith, but traditional Reformed orthodoxy has always insisted on that. With Augustine and Calvin, I affirm that true and full knowledge depends upon true faith. And it is true that knowing people personally is desirable and that this is frequently how we do learn things about them. Sometimes it is the only way we will come to know intimate personal things. But the tradition has never denied that.

Isn't it obvious, to turn things around, that some minimum orthodoxy, some basic understanding of biblical teaching, is a prerequisite for both ortho-praxis and ortho-encounter? Don't I have to know what the truth is before I can do the truth except as a matter of blind accident? And don't I at least have to know something about God, say, that He is the Father of Jesus Christ, before I can savingly encounter Him? There are gods many and religious experiences many. I must know something about the true God if I am to know my encounter is genuine. Do I really encounter the Christ of faith unless I believe He is the Jesus of history, that He literally rose from the dead, that His death was a sacrifice for sin? The Christ of whom those things are not true does not exist. Isn't believing them essential to saving faith? Didn't the Ethiopian Eunuch have to understand the Gospel before he could respond in faith? Isn't that true for us all? Of course it is regeneration which causes faith. But even the unregenerate can understand. On the epistemological issue, the

tradition is correct in spite of its tendency to overemphasize orthodoxy.

If the above arguments are insufficient, let me now demonstrate that the newer Christian epistemologies are inconsistent with the practice of those who defend them. They claim that ideas and beliefs follow from or rest upon proper living or personal encounter. If defenders of this view practiced what they preached, they would suppose that my incorrect idea of truth was the result of a lack of proper living or absence of relevant personal encounter. Thus changing my idea would require somehow involving me in correct praxis or encounter. But the newer epistemologists attempt no such thing, nor do they really seem to believe it. For they have argued all along that one key reason why theology and the church are in a mess is because they have been using a faulty epistemology and theory of truth. In other words, bad ideas have caused deformed faith and life, not the reverse. And now they wish to change me, the church, and theology by convincing us by philosophical, theological, and biblical arguments that the traditional view is mistaken. By first changing our ideas they hope to lead us to right living and right relating, not the reverse. Both the assumption behind their arguments and the act of their proposing them imply the falsehood of their thesis. They too place beliefs before life. If their praxis is correct, their theory is false. If the theory is true, their praxis is false. Like the solipsist at pains to convince other people that he alone exists, the newer epistemologist is self-stultifying.

These epistemological insights which Christians think they have gained from contemporary philosophy do not stand up to scrutiny. The rhetoric and polemic against the traditional view of truth lacks a firm foundation. Nevertheless, the calls of contemporary Christians for the return of orthodoxy to its proper place within our personal and ecclesiastical lives are as timely and necessary now as those of others in previous ages. We must always heed calls to true religion even if mixed with bad epistemology.

And we must recognize the legitimacy of contemporary criticisms of rationalism and intellectualism as well as their insistence on the importance of the other dimensions of life. What is objectionable in the newer epistemologies is their positive irra-

tionalism. They ultimately reduce propositional truth to something non-cognitive and detach it from how things really are. The position I wish to defend recognizes the relative role of intellect in human life, but also its irreducible, *sui generis* place and nature. We should avoid both rationalism and irrationalism but promote a healthy respect for rationality.

Argument for a Realistic Theory of Truth

Having indicated why the newer views of truth ought not to be adopted, I now wish to show why the traditional (i.e. correspondence to reality) view ought to be retained: it is the only one consistent with how we ought to read Scripture. The Bible, though an historical, human book, is also the God-breathed account of how things really are. Though not always crystal-clear, and written in the language and literary forms of other cultures, what the Bible discloses about the nature of God and the history of His relationship with His creation, how the Bible views human nature, created and fallen, what the Bible says about the means of our salvation through Jesus Christ, how history will turn out, how God wills us to live—all of that is the basic, factual truth of how things really are. The Bible does not merely reveal values and meanings which we must now apply to the factual world as seen by modern science. The Bible itself proclaims a factual or ontic world-view which is the ultimate horizon within which we must interpret reality. There is no more ultimate viewpoint from which we can reinterpret the biblical view of God, humanity, and cosmos. I have called this view “biblical realism.” This way of reading Scripture has characterized the church throughout history and it ought to be retained.⁹

Necessary for retaining this approach to Scripture is a realistic, correspondence theory of propositional truth. I wish to defend this claim by means of the following thought-experiment. Let’s all agree that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, trustworthy word of God, sufficient for our salvation. Let’s also agree that among other things it asserts true propositions. But now let’s apply the non-cognitivist, coherence, and correspondence theories of propositional truth and see what difference that makes.¹⁰

The non-cognitivist view holds that a proposition is true if

and only if it arises out of and/or results in improved or authentic existence in some non-cognitive dimension of life. The truth of biblical propositions by this definition does no more than assure me that believing them will have certain positive functions within my life. It does not necessarily tell me that this is the way things really are or historically have been.

The coherence view has a similar consequence. A true biblical proposition, like any true proposition, is true only because it fits properly into a belief-system. Unless one is an ontological idealist, the truth of the proposition implies nothing about the objective reality of its referent. The Christian coherentist again falls short of biblical realism.

Only the correspondence theory of truth entails that the true propositional content of biblical revelation points beyond the life of the believer, beyond the system of Christian belief, and beyond the Bible itself to God, the world, history, God's people, His saving acts, His will, His coming Kingdom. That is biblical realism.

Let me elaborate. Both non-cognitivism and coherentism allow the possibility that the Bible is nothing more than a salvific fiction. Consider the following possibility. Assume God did inspire the Bible and, since He is faithful, He will save us. But suppose further that the history of His dealings with Israel, the incarnation of the Son, the bodily resurrection—all of that apparently factual stuff is false, a religious fiction. Yet suppose that God has actually decided that if we believe it and live it as though it were factually true, He will save us. Here we have inspired, salvific, coherent, and existentially-useful biblical teaching which is factually false. Loving parents do sometimes tell their children falsehoods that motivate proper behavior, after all. Contemporary hermeneutics insist that the biblical text "projects a world." A current fad in theology is to say that the Bible presents a "story." But novels, myths, and epics project worlds and tell stories too. Without a realistic theory of truth, there is no way to distinguish the Bible's message from divinely-authorized fiction.

The correspondence theorist does not deny that biblical revelation is coherent and existentially gripping and useful for life. He does not deny that gaining proper knowledge of it involves commitment and involvement. He insists on these things.

It is just that they are not what make biblical teaching true. Only the fact that it lights up reality the way it actually was and is and will be makes biblical teaching true.

The major problem with the correspondence theory, you recall, is that ultimately there is no way to verify the adequacy or correspondence of our beliefs and reality. This remains a challenge in philosophy and science. But it is no problem with Scripture, since that is divine revelation, not human quest. God's authority guarantees the truth of Scripture. We do not need to test the veracity of its claims. That is why biblical realism is the most certain worldview possible. This is the key theme in Bavinck's *The Certainty of Faith*.

Of course the task and challenge of *interpreting* Scripture remains. That biblical truth is guaranteed does not guarantee that my interpretation of it is correct. And here we confront the tough questions about the methods and results of biblical exegesis. On that we do not always see eye to eye. But this is a fundamentally troublesome problem only when we shift the standard of truth from Scripture itself to someplace in the interpretive relationship. Just because there is no fool-proof, rationally-demonstrable, mechanically-applicable, results-assured method of interpretation is no reason whatsoever for relocating the criterion of truth or denying biblical realism. Human lack of omniscience is no basis for denying trans-subjective order. Being stuck half way up a rope ladder is no reason for cutting it loose from its mooring. Scripture is the norm. And our exegesis, confessions, theology, and life must always be judged by that standard, even if some disagreements are possible. Certainly in this sense, as the acknowledged truth of biblical doctrines, orthodoxy is always primary. But it is orthodoxy only because it rightly points beyond itself to God through Jesus Christ and the history of their relation to their creation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to chronicle and criticize the changing face of truth out of a commitment to Scripture and the Reformed faith. My conclusion has been that we ought to

reform the traditional view of truth within the framework of a biblical realism rather than opt for a contemporary view of truth. We need the traditional view to continue reforming according to the Word of God. Adopting a new view will only make that harder.

In defending the traditional view of truth I mean to strike no blow for conservatism, doctrinalism, or intellectualism, however. To whatever extent we are guilty of these sins, we ought to repent of them and not promote them in our continuing discussions. The Scriptures we profess to believe tell us that we ought to love one another, esteem the other more highly, be filled with the fruits of the Spirit, and not waste our time over *useless* doctrine. If some of us are really in error, the Scripture also tells us how to engage in loving mutual discipline. That does not include breaking fellowship, publically calling one another knaves or fools, or in any other way breaking the bonds of unity and peace. May God give us the grace to be His obedient children.

In spite of my concern over the sinful intellectualist tendencies of our tradition, I nevertheless have chosen here to defend orthodoxy, properly understood as biblical doctrine. For one can neither trust God nor live obediently unless one has a minimally correct understanding of what it is to trust and obey. But there is another reason.

Whereas some parts of the denomination may still labor under the yoke of traditionalism and doctrinalism, in many places that is a danger no longer. Were doctrinalism our biggest problem, I would have stressed orthopraxis in this paper. In fact the pendulum has swung to the other side. Many people neither know very much about the Reformed confessions and the Reformed tradition nor do they care. Bible knowledge does not seem on the increase, either. The reasons for this are many and varied: reaction against doctrinalism, anti-intellectualism, ecumenicalism, emphasis on orthopraxis, a "just sharing" approach to faith, growing worldliness—perhaps others. Whatever the motives, this tendency is just as serious a threat to a truly Reformed church as is doctrinalism. The unity of our denomination is centered on our common knowledge and confession of what God's Word proclaims as well as a common program of ministry to the world. If the life goes out of that confessional

consensus, eventually the unity will go out of the denomination. What God speaks, we must hear and do. But before we can do it, we must understand what He says. That is the sense in which orthodoxy is primary. May Jesus Christ, who is Himself the truth, enable us both to understand and do the truth as we continue to dialogue.

Notes

1. Two excellent recent accounts are Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985).
2. Cf. *Institutes* I. xv. 6 and 7.
3. An interesting medieval attempt to identify the varieties of truth is Anselm's *De Veritate*.
4. Philosophers hotly debate the nature of propositions. My definition reflects my realism. Nominalists and conceptualists would not like it.
5. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Ch. 6.
6. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Double Day Anchor, 1962), p. 237.
7. *God With Us*, English translation, (Grand Rapids: Secretariat of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod), p. 10.
8. Jorge Lara-Braud, *What is Liberation Theology?* (Atlanta: General Assembly Mission Board, Presbyterian Church in the U.S., 1980), p. 35.
9. The same point has been underscored recently by Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984).
10. I am unaware of any view of *propositional* truth, including those used by neo-Calvinist philosophers, which does not fall into one of these three categories. That is why I am choosing from among them. I am certainly open to the possibility of another, perhaps "radically biblical," alternative. But I cannot think of what it would be like, nor have I seen it spelled out by anyone else.

Heresy and Toleration in the Christian Church

John Van Dyk

Introduction

At the outset three remarks about the title are in order. First, as it stands, the title might mislead one into thinking that this paper will present merely an historical sketch of some of the heresies that have plagued the church. True, we shall consider the history of the church—largely the early church; our aim, however, is to move beyond historical considerations to a more systematic exploration of the question of discord and polarization as it confronts us in the church today. Second, the term “heresy,” as it appears in the title, may well be too strong and pointed a word. My concern in this paper is not restricted to just heresy as one usually thinks of it, that is, as unacceptable deviation from an orthodox position, but extends more broadly to the phenomenon of religious discord and conflict in general. I use the term “heresy” in the title nonetheless, since heresy unmistakably signifies conflict, and since, even today, the fine line between conflict in general and heresy in particular is not always clear. Finally, the term “toleration,” too, is somewhat problematic. It does not lend itself very well to a description of the early church. “Toleration” is too much a Lockean and Enlightenment term, loaded with all sorts of rationalistic baggage, not the least of which concerns the modern idea of the autonomy of human beings. But we can use the term, along with the words “tolerant” and “tolerate,” when we interpret it to reflect the biblical idea of “loving forbearance.” I shall presently return to this Pauline conception of toleration.

In this essay I shall treat the general theme of heresy and toleration—or conflict and forbearance—from a threefold perspective. First we look at some historical considerations. Then we move on to examine the theme from a systematic point of view. Finally, some practical issues and recommendations present themselves. It must be emphasized that this paper represents merely an introduction to a large and complicated question. What follows, then, is designed to do no more than serve as a springboard for further reflection and discussion.

Historical Considerations

I begin with some historical considerations. Travel back with me, will you, to the early, Apostolic church. The New Testament church, of course, was not like the denominational church we know today. When the Apostle Paul addresses the “church” in Corinth or Ephesus, he is not speaking to a group of people who meet on Sundays in a building on the corner of First and Main streets in Corinth or Ephesus. Rather, he addresses the *ecclesia*, that is, a community of people who have been called out from the darkness of paganism to form a new society within the larger Greco-Roman world. This new society, the *ecclesia*, believes in its heart and confesses with its mouth that Jesus is Lord! It is a community, therefore, that stoutly refuses to confine its interests and activities to so-called spiritual matters, theological doctrine, or Sunday religion; on the contrary, it aims to subject *all* dimensions of practical, everyday life to the Kingdom rule of Jesus Christ, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord of all!

Now, this early Christian community, facing a large, hostile and dangerous world, exuded a sense of what we would now probably judge to be idealistic overconfidence. The early *ecclesia* looked at the wisdom of the world and called it “foolishness.” They looked at the might of the Roman Emperor and regarded it as just a plaything in the hand of God. Why this confidence? The answer is simple: the early Christians possessed the Gospel, or, as Jude calls it, “the faith once for all entrusted to the saints.” This Gospel, says the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:16, is the power of God for the salvation of everyone that

believes: first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile, that is, for the whole wide world. This Gospel, Paul emphasizes in I Corinthians 4:20, is not a matter of talk, but of power. It is the transforming, renewing power of God.

It is important for us to see that to the early Christians this Gospel, the "faith once for all entrusted to the saints," exhibited two dimensions. On the one hand, it is complete. John, in his first letter, chapter 3:20, says: "You have an anointing from the Holy Spirit, and you know all things." That is like saying: you know all you need to know; you don't need anything else. On the other hand, the early Christians realized that the faith once delivered is not fixed or static but in need of growth and development. As we read in John 16:13: "The Spirit of truth has come, and he shall guide you into all truth." Clearly the implication here is: you haven't arrived yet; the Spirit has to do a lot of work with you folks. And so we see Paul struggling, when in answer to difficult questions—such as, for example, the question about virgins, raised by the Corinthians in I Corinthians 7—he responds by saying that on some of these matters he did not hear a direct word from the Lord. How often must we, too, struggle with issues about which we have not heard a direct command from the Lord either. Yet in those cases, too, the Gospel must be sounded and applied; the Spirit must lead us into truth.

It did not take very long for the early church to be beset with conflicting viewpoints and interpretations. Think only of Paul's scuffle with those who claimed to be of Cephas or Apollos or of some other master. It is not now my intention to sketch for you the wide variety of viewpoints entering the *ecclesia*. Nor do I want to trace the fascinating phenomenon of orthodoxy defining and establishing itself under the pressures of heresies. You can read about these matters in many books. Rather, I direct your attention to a somewhat different question: What attitude did the early church take towards differences of opinions and viewpoints?

The Scriptures tell us that Christ and the Apostles proclaimed a two-fold attitude: on the one hand, the early Christians were to be gentle and forbearing. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:2, "Walk in all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." Clearly, we would say, Paul is

recommending a spirit of tolerance. But there is the other side as well: the Scriptures sound an unmistakable call to watch out for and to get rid of wolves in sheepsclothing, to drive out the false prophets, and the like. "Purge the old yeast," says Paul in I Corinthians 5:7, "that you may be a new lump, a new batch of dough." Surely such an admonition represents a spirit of intolerance.

Does this mean that the Apostles spoke with a "forked tongue"? By no means! Both attitudes were to be maintained, but not at the same time and in the same place. The difference is this: *within* the genuine *ecclesia*, that is, among those who believed and confessed that Jesus is Lord, the spirit of loving forbearance and longsuffering must prevail. No wonder, then, that such a spirit of patience and forbearance allowed a wide range of variation in "doctrine and life." As a result, Paul had no real scruples about circumcising Timothy, even though moments earlier the Synod of Jerusalem had clearly spoken against the need for such a ritual. Think also of the many chapters in the first letter to the Corinthians where Paul stresses Christian liberty: all things are lawful, he summarizes, though not all things are expedient. Indeed, the spirit of loving forbearance, a spirit which allows freedom and diversity within the bonds of the confession that Jesus is Lord—that spirit is to be maintained within the *ecclesia*.

At the same time, there were moments when the spirit of intolerance must be exercised. This attitude was required in the face of heresies and threats representing *alternate* worldviews and religions, alternate gospels such as Judaism, Docetism, Gnosticism, and a host of other Greco-oriental Hellenistic religions. No toleration here! As Paul says in Galatians 1:9: "If any man preaches a gospel other than that which you have received, let him be anathema—let him be accursed!" Pretty strong language!

Three Regrettable Developments

We move on to consider the Christian church of the second and third centuries. The Apostles have left the scene. Only a few of their followers, the so-called Apostolic Fathers, are left. A

new breed of leaders has taken over. During this time the Christian church came to be affected powerfully by a variety of developments, three of which we want to single out, because these three permanently altered the life of the *ecclesia* and its stand towards heresy and conflict. These three developments, I believe, slowly but surely killed the spirit of forbearance and liberty which Christians are to exhibit towards each other. They introduced a growing measure of inflexibility, intolerance, and negativism, and for centuries to come, yes, even to this very day, stifled the church's ability to exercise genuine Christian freedom.

The first of these three historical developments is synthesis with, or accommodation to, pagan Greek intellectualism. I can only draw a sketchy picture.¹ The Greeks were masters at partitioning the unity of life into disconnected pieces. Of special importance to our topic is their separation of knowing from doing, of knowledge from action, or theory from practice. They regarded knowledge and thinking, the life of the mind, as akin to the divine. The intellect and rationality, they asserted, must rule all of human action. Early Christian Apologists, such as Aristides and Justin Martyr, adopted this Greek intellectualism. They, too, saw reason as a divine spark, separate from and superior to life or to conduct.

As Christians, the Apologists recognized a third element: faith. Faith, they argued, is a special gift from God and so must be still higher than reason. Since they already regarded reason as akin to the divine and thus far above mere human conduct, they naturally associated reason closely with faith. Reason, they concluded, must prop up, support, even interact with faith. Thus faith and reason, intimately related, have little contact with the life of action. Believing belongs with knowing, not with doing. By means of this kind of synthesis the Apologists introduced into the Christian church the process of intellectualization of both doctrine and faith. Just a word about each.

First, the intellectualization of doctrine. The Old Testament idea of doctrine, of "teaching," knows nothing of a three-tiered structure composed of faith, reason, and conduct. Neither does the New Testament concept of *didaskalia*, of "teaching." In the Old Testament teaching means the message of God to be heard and to be responded to. Knowing, in fact, is not separate from

doing, but a form of doing. Both are to be an integral response to our hearing of the Word of the Lord. As in the Old Testament, so in the New, "doctrine" is not a matter of either faith or reason separated from conduct or from life; rather, doctrine *is* the Gospel, consisting of both the message of salvation and a new way of life in response. Doctrine is "The Way," a single unbroken response to the Gospel, without any separations between faith and reason or between faith and conduct. To put it differently: orthodoxy coincides with orthopraxis. Because of synthesis with Greek intellectualism, "doctrine" changed from a rich, life-encompassing reality into an abstract set of theological statements, a set of logically articulated propositions. Doctrine degenerated into reason's formulation of faith.

The intellectualization of doctrine went hand in hand with the intellectualization of faith itself. The biblical idea of faith, which includes components such as confidence, trust, commitment, an awareness of the demands of the Word of God, and the willingness and ability to respond in obedience and love—this rich idea of faith came to be reduced to formal and abstract propositions. Faith came to be reduced to a form of thinking. The church father Augustine, for example, put it as follows: "To believe is to think with assent."² As a result, the demonstration of one's faith was no longer one's life, as the Apostle James would have it, but merely the ability to state the content of doctrine.

As the intellectualization of doctrine and faith, resulting from the synthesis with Greek intellectualism, proceeded, the church grew steadily more inflexible. The early church had tended to be very cautious in dealing with differences of opinion within the Christian community, as Professor Ted Plantinga has rightly observed.³ But once the recognition that the Holy Spirit leads us onwards into truth was lost, once doctrine came to be divorced from life and frozen into immutable propositions representing absolute truth, any development of insight or theologically new understanding was viewed with suspicion. In fact, the presence or absence of heresy came to be determined on the basis of purely logical true/false criteria divorced from confessional contexts, a procedure which culminated in the heresy trials and hairsplitting disputations of the high Middle Ages. The spirit of intolerance, originally directed towards alternate

worldviews and alternate religions, came to be exercised *within* the community against anyone who deviated "doctrinally," now understood in a strictly intellectualistic sense. You see this spirit at work in, for example, the correspondence between Augustine and Jerome. In their debates Augustine often accused Jerome of "dangerous heresy," when in fact Jerome merely proposed a variant reading of the text.⁴

The second of the three developments permanently affecting the Christian community concerns the institutionalization of the church. Essentially this means that the *ecclesia*, originally a society within a society, came to be bottled up in an institution among many other institutions, eventually leading to the identification of the relationship between the church and the world as a relationship between grace and nature. This has become such a familiar and well discussed theme that we need say nothing about it except to point out that deviation from doctrine, or heresy, now came to mean deviation from official church doctrine. Actually, two categories of heresy now emerge: doctrinal heresy, confined to questions of church dogma, and deviations in non-ecclesiastical areas, i.e., in life style.⁵ We shall return to this theme in a moment when we look at systematic considerations.

We can be brief about the third development affecting the church, the growing loss of Kingdom vision.⁶ Once the real Kingdom vision was lost, that is, once it was no longer seen that Christ is making all things new, a different emphasis began to enter the early medieval church. The stress began to fall on the life hereafter. It came to be believed that the only goal of the Christian life was to attain to heaven. The idea that a believer has no purpose other than to get to heaven and to stay out of hell introduced an intolerable fear of heresy into the life of the Christian community: heresy now meant interference with one's eternal welfare! Heretics, as a result, came to be regarded as much more of a menace than murderers: murderers can kill only the body; heretics kill the soul! Consequently, even the slightest variation in accepted doctrine was too dangerous to tolerate and had to be eradicated. This helps us to understand the fanaticism with which heretics were persecuted in the Middle Ages.

As a footnote to those historical considerations we might well ask: To what extent were these three factors corrected by

the Reformation? Certainly much of the heritage of Greek intellectualism, of the reduction of the *ecclesia* to the instituted church, and of the loss of Kingdom vision was transmitted into the Protestantism that followed the Reformation.

Systematic Considerations

We begin with a question: What can we learn from the early and medieval church? At least three points emerge from the historical considerations just presented.

The first arises from a further examination of the twofold character of the Gospel. As we saw, the "faith once delivered" is complete and yet dynamic and unfolding. Because of the historical factors just outlined, the tendency in the church, and also among *us*, I fear, is to stress the one and to neglect the other. That is, we tend to view the Gospel as static and immutable, no longer as dynamic. I propose that we once again see the Gospel message within the larger context of creation and redemption. The Gospel message of the early church came among us to be applied to the redirection of the world, to the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel message bears the same character as the Kingdom of God, indeed, of the creation itself. Like the creation and the Kingdom, the faith once delivered exhibits a tension between the "already" and the "not yet," between the finished and the unfinished. The creation is finished, yet needs to be unfolded; the Kingdom of God is here, and yet it is to come. So through the Gospel message, the faith once delivered, we know all that we need to know, and yet the Spirit will lead us in the truth. This theme is not sufficiently developed among us.

The second point concerns the effect of the three historical developments, sketched above, on the internal relations within the Christian community. These three factors contributed to the destruction of genuine forbearance and love and replaced them with what is commonly understood as "heresy-hunting mentality." We refer to this mentality in other terms as well, when we talk, for example, about "self-appointed watchmen on the walls of Zion," and the like. The "heresy-hunting mentality," I believe, is alive and well today. It has been alive and well for a

long time. It leaps off the pages of the history of the church. Its origin lies in the transfer of the attitude of intolerance towards *alternate* gospels to intolerance within the Christian community itself. Consequently the attitude of forbearance disappears within that community. An ironic result of this heresy-hunting mentality is that it destroys the ability to recognize genuine heresy. It turns the attitude of caution towards the recognition of heresy, exhibited by the early church, into an attitude of quick judgment and condemnation conjoined with arrogant self-righteousness. It turns Christians into Pharisees. It fosters the spirit of division and discord, and has led to the tragedy of innumerable schisms.

By way of footnote we observe that the intolerance built into the heresy-hunting mentality blinds us to the real significance of difference of opinions among us. It regards all differences of opinion as significant, and often as equally significant. Thus *any* difference of opinion raises red flags and evokes a "cry wolf" reaction, thereby dulling our sensitivity to genuinely significant differences, and destroying our ability to distinguish between the important and the unimportant.

Now the third point. I believe that if we want to discuss the heresy-toleration issue meaningfully in an attempt to come to grips with the tragedy of polarization within the Christian community, yes, within our own community, then we need to consider and work with a number of ingredients, a number of factors that play a tremendously powerful role, but which we somehow tend to overlook or even ignore. In our discussions and debate we often act as if these factors simply don't exist. Let me list a few—in fact, seven—of those that seem to me to be the most compelling:

1. *The separation of doctrine from life:* As I indicated earlier, because of the synthesis with Greek thinking, doctrine came to be intellectualized and divorced from conduct. Or, to put it differently, orthodoxy came to be divorced from orthopraxis. Thus two forms of heresy emerged: heresy in doctrine, and heresy in life style. For most Christians, heresy is primarily doctrinal, hence irrelevant to life style. For such Christians the question of, for example, women-in-office is *the* issue, not whether or not one lives a capitalistic life style. For others, heresy in life style will inevitably lead to doctrinal heresy, for ex-

ample, when it is believed that a person struggling with homosexuality will eventually have problems with the nature of the Trinity. Still others locate the essence of heresy in the area of life style alone, and impatiently regard doctrinal debate as insignificant gobbledegook or meaningless babble.

No doubt our views of heresy and toleration will change when we see more clearly just what the Greek separation between doctrine and life has done and is doing among us. Very likely our attitudes towards one another would change as well, if we were to recapture the early Apostolic vision of heresy as representing *alternate religions*, that is, alternate ways of both knowing and doing.

2. *Constancy versus change*: This has to do, once again, with the finished and unfinished character of the Gospel message and of the Kingdom of God itself. This important factor affects, among other things, our conceptions of doctrine, theology, and hermeneutics. Unfortunately, at present we do not have a good theory or a good understanding of change and relativity. Meanwhile various positions and viewpoints on this critical point are assumed in our discussions and often go unrecognized, or, at the least, are not made explicit, positions ranging from the common conviction that orthodoxy is immutable (essentially a medieval scholastic view), to the idea that orthodoxy is always in process, change, and development (an idea reflecting Hegelianism and nineteenth-century historicism).

3. *Complexity versus simplicity*: At present wide-ranging conceptions interfere with meaningful discussion among us. For some of us, complex theological and hermeneutical matters are black-and-white simple, an attitude often displayed by certain segments of the conservative community. For others, all theological and doctrinal matters are too difficult to solve. Such a view, if taken to the extreme, will lead to theological and hermeneutical skepticism. The point is that differences in understanding of what is complex and of what is simple compound the misunderstandings among us.

4. *Distinguishing between what belongs to an alternate religion and what does not*: How can we tell whether a certain viewpoint originates in an alternate worldview or is merely a variation within our own worldview? Too often we throw caution to the wind and are quick to assign a difference of opinion

to an alternate worldview, without taking the time to examine whether the supposed alternate worldview is indeed an alternate worldview. To establish whether or not differences on points of doctrine do indeed reflect differences of worldview requires a much better grasp of the nature and character of worldviews, including our own. I dare say that on this point we are making splendid progress.⁷ Still, much more work needs to be done.

5. *Language and meaning:* Recent studies in linguistics and semantics have uncovered the seemingly infinite complexity present in even simple communications and discourse. Given the subtlety and ambiguity of language, it seems a miracle that any two persons can agree on anything at all! I ask, in our discussions of differences of opinion, are we sufficiently aware of this linguistic dimension?

6. *Emotions and personality problems:* Conflicts in psychic constitution and personality frequently lead to needless confrontation and polarization among us. Let's face it: there is not a single one among us who is psychically or emotionally completely normal. It may well be that believing ourselves to be normal is proof of our abnormality! The fact is, we all have our hang-ups. We all have our struggles and our doubts, our preferences, our attachments, our differing ways of reacting, our defensiveness, our masks behind which we cleverly hide. Too often it happens that an emotional attachment or commitment to a position or a perspective prevents us from opening up to each other in freedom and fairness. Too often we are more intent on winning the argument than on getting at the truth. Too often we are quick to point fingers at others in a grand gesture of self-righteousness. The sad fact is that too often the problems and the conflicts among us arise not first of all on the basis of real issues, but on the basis of the kind of people we are and the kind of personalities we have. Perhaps what we need is a Christian psychology of heresy and toleration! Maybe such a psychology could also help us to understand the forces that bring factions into existence. Intriguing and promising, by the way, is the work done recently in social psychology, a relatively new field.⁸ We do well to examine this work carefully, to see what we can learn.

7. *Sociological dimensions:* To what extent do we factor into our attempts to debate important issues the enormous im-

pact of social influences and contexts? Sometimes this dimension hits home when we see what impact broader experiences have on young people of close-knit communities; when we see, for example, young people rejecting the Christian faith in which they have grown up once they experience what they perceive as the alluring "freedom" of the wider world. Sociological dimensions appear to have as much to do with the building of factions as the psychological forces I referred to a moment ago.

There are other factors, too numerous to mention. About all of them two summary comments are in order. First, they need our attention, if we are to understand each other. We must not act as if they simply do not exist. Secondly, an awareness of these subtle and often unrecognized factors can only humble us, and prompt us to exercise caution as we seek to deal with one another as Christians. A consciousness of these factors helps us to see the wider contours of the problem of heresy and toleration, stimulates us to exercise patience, and shows us that being a peacemaker is certainly no piece of cake!

Practical Considerations

Learning to live with one another in the bond of unity: Can it be done? My answer is: no. It cannot be done. We only need to look at the history of the Christian church. It is one long sad story of division upon division, a tragic tale of the rending of the body of Christ into ever different pieces. Indeed, polarization and differences appeared already in the earliest church and have never left it. Think of the differences between Peter and Paul, think of the Synod of Jerusalem, and think of the innumerable church councils since that day long ago. Conflict, divisions, discord, and polarizations—these, rather than unity, seem to be the essential features that characterize the Christian church. Not that the Christian community did not know better! The words of Paul in I Corinthians 1:10 have echoed and echoed throughout the centuries: "Let there be no divisions among you." The prayer of Jesus Himself, recorded for us in John 17, when He looked toward heaven and said: "Father, I pray that they may be one!"—that prayer has reverberated through the prayers of Christians of all ages. Again, Peter's urging—in I Peter 2:8, for

example—that we be like-minded and live in loving harmony with one another has been known to the Christian church for the last two thousand years. No, there has not been a lack of knowledge. When at the last day the trumpet will sound, and when the Lord will ask us: How come you have cut My body into so many little pieces? no one will be able to say: But Sir, I didn't know that You wanted us to be one!

Though the Christian community has always sensed the reality of the norm of unity, it has never been able to progress very far along the path of reaching the norm. Somehow, even in the reaching towards the norm of unity, the results have been division and polarization. You and I know why that is. It is not because only a few of us are right and everybody else is wrong. It is not because a few of us have the truth and everybody else is steeped in error. That is not the reason. Our inability to respond obediently to the norm of unity is ultimately due to the disintegrating effects of sin in our personal and communal life. It is sin, pure and simple, that lies at the root of our inability to respond to God's central love command. To be sure, we are Christians, people whose sins have been nailed to the cross, forgiven Christians. But forgiven Christians are not necessarily loving and obedient Christians.

Given the devastating reality of sin, the question is not: How do we achieve unity? Rather, we must ask: How can we learn to tolerate each other's differences? Or, to put it in more biblical language: How can we learn to practice true forbearance and longsuffering? Note that Paul himself placed his call for unity in the context of patience and forbearance. In Ephesians 4 he says: "I urge you to walk a life worthy of your calling, in meekness and longsuffering forbearing one another in love as you make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Learning to tolerate each other as members of the body of Christ must remain high on our agenda. But such learning to tolerate cannot come about without a continual call to repentance as we communally struggle to conquer selfish ambition and vain conceit, as Paul tells us in Philippians 2:3. Cornelis Veenhof has put it well. He says: "The concern [for unity] is primarily with the crucifying of the flesh with its evil works, such as feuds, quarrels, jealousy, partiality, dissensions, and the

like. And, conversely, the concern is positively to reveal the fruits of the Spirit, which consist of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:19-23). In *Gereformeerd* [Reformed] circles, when dealing with church unity, we have often put the emphasis upon agreement of doctrine to the neglect of the above-mentioned apostolic admonition. Furthermore, with doctrine under discussion, the argument was mainly about dogmatic questions. And in this regard there was often intellectual manipulation. It cannot be stressed enough that the absolutely primary rule for realizing church unity [I would prefer to say: for learning to forbear—or tolerate—one another-JVD] is conquering selfishness with all its side-effects: self-will, ambition, self-concern, hunger for power, pride, and so forth. Conversely, this means putting into practice selflessness with all its implications and ramifications.”⁹

In this quotation the reference to doctrinal agreement as contrasted to the apostolic admonition is important: it shows the effects of scholasticism and rationalism in our community. We tend to pay lip-service to the apostolic admonition to crucify the flesh and to reveal the fruits of the Spirit. But in reality a lingering commitment to the trustworthiness of reason continues to fire expectations of possibilities of detailed, rationally formulated doctrinal agreements. Such a commitment shows itself when, for example, we find ourselves unable to cope with Christians from traditions differing from ours who hold their positions in all sincerity and believe them to be fully in accordance with the Scriptures.

Concluding Recommendations

In conclusion, a few general recommendations. I say “general,” because there are no easy answers. It would be nice to be able to say: Do this! and Do that! and presto: we’re all one big happy family. Alas, that is not to be. It does seem clear, however, that leadership must be provided. Without leadership, the community at large—I am now thinking of our own community—tends to flounder about. Some years ago, the Rev. B.J. Haan used to convene so-called “leadership conferences” at

Dordt College. He would call a variety of people together, most of them occupying some leadership position in the denomination, arrange them around a table, and have them talk. Holding such conferences can only be a good idea. The May, 1985, conference on orthodoxy and orthopraxis, held at Redeemer College, was also a good idea. A first recommendation, therefore, is that such conferences not cease. Not that holding meetings will eliminate all problems. But without meetings the problems may be more difficult to solve.

A second recommendation concerns Christian education. I believe that Christian elementary and secondary education can play a significant role in bringing about an ability to tolerate one another in love. Already at those early levels we need to work on the kind of instruction and curriculum that will counteract doctrinaire dogmatism and closed-mindedness, and foster a sense of flexibility. Teacher education departments in Christian colleges should give this point some serious thought and a place on the agenda.

Our Christian colleges, as well as institutions such as the Institute for Christian Studies—and, who knows, eventually a Reformed university about which there is currently much discussion—can initiate other measures as well. They could, for example, draw up research programs designed to come to grips with some of the interfering factors listed earlier in this essay. We have talked for a long time about the reformation of scholarship, an important issue indeed. But it has always been my belief, and it still is my belief, that the reformation of scholarship must lead to concrete applications. Insight into the nature of the historical, psychological, theological, and sociological forces that freeze us into polarizations and divisions is sorely needed. Meanwhile we need to think innovatively about our college curricula. We have to work hard on the development of proposals to internationalize the curriculum, to introduce courses of study in varieties of world views and in cultural differences. We must rewrite our educational goals in order to make more room for achieving an understanding of and openness to human diversity. We must introduce ways and means of teaching the skills of conflict resolution. We must ask ourselves: How do we train the next generation to be peacemakers?

A final recommendation: we need to develop, in practical

ways, in the church, the home, the school, and in all other Christian institutions, a biblical perspective on truth. This is not the place to work this out. It seems clear, however, that much of the polarization within our community results from unbiblical accommodations to pagan concepts of truth. Unexamined and unstated assumptions about that perennial question "What is truth?" continue to plague our discussions. Suppose I were to give a little quiz to a roomful of Christians and ask them to formulate a brief definition of truth: How many different versions would I collect? Yet we are called to remain committed to an encouraging biblical dictum: the truth will set us free. Free also from polarizations, from liberalism and from conservatism and from all the other isms that now keep us apart and at bay. Free even from distorted conceptions of truth!

So what am I saying? Can we attain unity? Probably not. Can we learn to tolerate each other? Can we develop a level of patience, caution, forbearance, longsuffering, meekness, such that at least a sense, or a semblance of unity can emerge? Given the history of the church, our present situation, and the reality of sin, I am not optimistic. Yet with the Lord all things are possible. He promised us to lead us into Truth, and the Truth will set us free. Ultimately it is not we, but the Spirit of God who must do it. Who knows what the Spirit has in store for God's people? It may well be that the Lord soon will say: "You CRC people in Canada and in the United States, you have muddled along long enough. I am sick and tired of your squabbles and quarrels. I will spew you out of My mouth." On the other hand, if we genuinely repent, and learn to speak the truth in love, if—to quote Paul once more, this time from Colossians 3—we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with each other and forgiving grievances, and over all these virtues put on love, which can bind us all together in perfect unity, if we really do all that and more, then maybe the Spirit will astound us. Then maybe we will be able to sing of that well-known song not only verse 1—"We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored"—but also a slightly altered version of verse 4. Presently it reads: "All praise to the Father, from whom all things come, and all praise to Christ Jesus, His only Son, and all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one." Maybe some day, even

before the great and final day, we can sing: "All praise to the Father and all praise to the Son, and all praise to the Spirit who *has made us one.*"

Notes

1. For a more detailed account, see my essay "The Relation Between Faith and Action: An Introduction," *Pro Rege*, Vol. X, no. 4, June, 1982.
2. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, 5.
3. Theodore Plantinga, *Contending for the Faith* (Paideia Press, 1984), p.28.
4. See, for example, Augustine, *Letters*, 28. In this letter Augustine takes issue with Jerome's rather innocuous interpretation of Galatians 2:11-14. Augustine goes so far as to describe Jerome's position as an instance of "criminal madness."
5. Augustine's struggle with the Donatists illustrates the two levels of heresy. The central problem in Augustine's time was no longer a doctrinal heresy regarding the administration of the sacraments, but non-ecclesiastical social and lingual differences on the part of the Donatist culture in North Africa.
6. For a fuller description of this and the previous development, see my essay "From Deformation to Reformation" in *Will All the King's Men . . .* (Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), pp. 63-91.
7. E.g., Al Wolters' recent book *Creation Regained* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985) and Jim Olthuis' article on worldviews in *Christian Scholar's Review*, 14 (1985), pp. 153-164. Al has lucidly sketched the contours of a Reformed worldview for us, while Jim's work helps us to see how worldviews interact with other dimensions of life.
8. Important is the work of Christians such as Martin Bolt and David Myers. Note particularly Bolt and Myers, *The Human Connection* (Intervarsity Press, 1984), and Myers, *Social Psychology* (McGraw-Hill, 1983).
9. Cornelis Veenhof, "Church and Church Unity," in *Life is Religion* (Paideia Press, 1981), pp. 166-167.

Confessing the Reformed Faith Today

Gordon J. Spykman

I see this presentation, not as an end in itself, but as a modest means to a larger end. That end, as I envision it, coincides with the stated purpose of this conference, namely, to reduce the tensions and polarizations among us and thus to promote greater unity and forbearance. Keeping that end in mind, and in keeping with my assignment as I understand it, I shall focus on that confessional document, now widely circulated in CRC circles, known as the "Contemporary Testimony" (hereafter "C.T.").

Already in the early stages of its deliberations, the C.T. Committee reflected seriously on the question, whether a contemporary re-statement of the historic Christian faith might possibly be fruitful in fostering greater unity among us. I quote from a working paper, dated November, 1979: "Who knows whether a statement can be found which will unify us and rally us to serve the Lord in all of life? I really think that we'll just have to [draft such a testimony], as obediently as we can, in answer to the Scriptures, and let the Lord look after its acceptance and effectiveness."

As a major point-of-departure for communal reflection, I therefore submit the following thesis: If, as a confessional church, we are unable to achieve a substantial measure of confessional unity, it will be doubly and triply difficult to achieve such unity in our address to the more concrete and practical issues which trouble us. In this session of the conference that challenge takes on a very specific and sharp focus, namely: Can the C.T. possibly serve as a means unto the desired end of maintaining, restoring, and enhancing our orthodoxy and orthopraxy?

As a dramatic example of courageous confessional in-

initiative, let me recall with you briefly the Barmen Declaration of 1934. Germany had suffered enormous losses in the aftermath of World War I. Along with the rest of the world, it was caught in the throes of a severe depression. The year before, in 1933, a neo-pagan ideology had won control of the country, disguised as National Socialism, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. The so-called "German Christians" (largely the ecclesiastical bureaucrats and their followers) were beginning to fall in line with an anti-Biblical religious synthesis vigorously propagated by the Third Reich. How was the "Confessing Church" to respond to this mounting crisis? Their answer took the form of the Barmen Declaration. I am deeply impressed by the very timely and bold confession of faith drafted by Karl Barth and his colleagues in the face of this newly emergent, horrendously seductive threat. In response, this was in part their very contemporary testimony:

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" of the present imperial church government which are devastating the Church and are also thereby breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to accommodate the form of its message and order according to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.

Someone may object, however, that the implied comparison is odious, or at least dubious. Am I not over-stating the case for the C.T.? Not essentially, I think. As late twentieth century Christians we are being inundated by a veritable tidal wave of

modern secularism. To be sure, secularism cannot be identified simplistically with Naziism. But it is hardly less subtle, less insidious, or less all-encompassing. It has been argued, quite convincingly, I think, that ours is a "post-Christian era," and that we are therefore confronted with a spiritual challenge whose magnitude rivals that of the Reformation age. It is this deeply religious sense of urgency which motivates the drafting of the C.T. We live in what Harvey Cox approvingly calls "The Secular City." Between us and the age of our Reformed creeds lies that radical and sweeping upheaval known as the Enlightenment. That revolutionary turning-point in western history, followed by the scientific, industrial, and technological revolutions, has created a world vastly different from that of the Reformers who authored the Three Forms of Unity.

The overwhelming crisis of our times is therefore the omnipresent spirit of secularism—closer to us even than the nearest TV dial. Secularism is a half-way house to atheism, a form of practical atheism. Without denying the existence of God, secularists presume to exclude Him from public life. Belief in God does not count, so the argument goes, at those crucial decision-making centers in life where the important societal policies are hammered out which shape human culture and the course of history. In our social, economic, political, and educational institutions, in science, technology, the arts, and the media—there faith does not matter. Communal life in these spheres of activity is declared to be religiously neutral, and in that sense secular, free of so-called sacred influences. Thus religion is reduced to personal and private exercises. This is, in part at least, the rationale, stated repeatedly in synodical reports, which moved the church to declare that we "need to move in the direction of formulating a contemporary testimony in view of the secularization of modern life and culture."¹

Along the way the question was squarely faced, whether this "major new crisis" calls for a "major new response" in the form of a new confession. An affirmative answer was given. It was supported by the argument that "the modern crisis is the secularization of society," and that "the modern challenge is the mission of the church in the world." This position was reinforced by the following line of reasoning:

The presuppositions about the place of the church in society are no longer the same as in the time of the Reformation. The notion of "Christendom" in which all individuals and structures are Christian, and in which there are only varieties of the one faith, is no longer valid . . . The church can no longer speak, even locally, as a dominant majority in society. Locally and worldwide it is a dwindling minority . . . Whatever label—eg. "post-Christian"—one wishes to attach to this, it constitutes a drastic change in the situation of the Christian faith. This state of affairs is with us, and apparently not to be reversed. Probably it has been with us longer than we have suspected.²

Such then is our world today. In it we are summoned to erect a witness to the Reformed faith. In doing so, what language shall we borrow? What constitutes the core of such a confession? What crucial Word from the Lord must a secularized world hear, and we with it? The C.T. offers a forthright answer: "Our world belongs to God!" Listen to its opening lines:

As followers of Jesus Christ
living in this world,
which some think they can control,
but which others view with despair,
we declare with joy and trust:
Our world belongs to God!

These words are intended as a witness to ourselves as well as to those around us. For who would dare to claim that the church is immune to the secular spirit of the age? Secularism has in fact made deep inroads into the life of the Reformed community—so much so that many of our people are hardly aware of its pervasive impact upon us. This is probably not surprising. For "secularization is not a force which manifests itself occasionally in contemporary life. Secularism is [rather] the [very] matrix of modern life and culture; worldliness is the [very] substance that colors all thought and action in our society."³ We are called to be in this world, but not of it—that is, in the world, but *of* Christ. Yet, more often than we would care to admit, we are too little *in* it and too much *of* it. From time to time, therefore, the C.T. Committee engaged in serious self-examination along these lines: Is our church perhaps already so infected with the virus of

secularism as to disqualify us from making such a testimony? Are we so insensitive to its encroachments as to render us impotent to speak out against it? For generally "the response of Protestantism to the pervasive secularization of life has been one of accommodation."⁴ Such ponderings led to the conclusion that, however much we may already be more children of our times than children of God, to keep silence would only add to our vulnerability and our culpability. We therefore eagerly embraced our mandate to prepare "a radical and comprehensive attack upon an enemy that was not yet around when our ancestors formed our creeds."⁵

Given the reality of our contemporary cultural crisis, I pause now, before moving on, to consider briefly three matters of very practical concern. I invite you to reflect with me on these three questions.

First, I sometimes wonder about our sense of priorities. Perusing the current *Agenda for Synod 1985*—all 544 pages of fine print, not unlike most others of recent memory, crammed with a 1001 items, some ponderous, some puny—I am prompted to ask: Are we making ourselves guilty of majoring in minors? If our primary problem is secularism, are we expending too much ecclesiastical energy and too many kingdom resources on secondary and tertiary issues? Straining at gnats, while swallowing camels? Fighting a host of church political battles on several different fronts, but losing sight of the big war that's going on in the world? Are we like the proverbial man in the lowlands, busy repairing a leak in the roof, unmindful that a kilometer away the dike has broken, sending a tidal wave in upon his house? That's my first question.

Or, secondly, is it perhaps precisely the other way around. Do we wrestle so earnestly with these many concrete issues confronting us precisely because we do recognize in them serious symptoms of the secularizing spirit of our age? Does the controversy over women-in-church-office betray strong influences emanating from the secular feminist movement? Again, has the creation-evolution debate now reached an impasse because the issue is beclouded by a secular worldview? Once again, the complicated organizational disputes among denominational agencies—are they manifestations of a secular tendency to measure church work by the secularized efficiency standards of a large

business corporation? Remember, I'm only raising questions.

Now, in the third place, given the motivation and rationale behind the C.T., namely, that secularism must be countered as the fundamental crisis of our times: Does this not carry with it some clear implications for the way we conduct business in our church assemblies as consistories, classes, and synods? Should we not try to avoid getting lost in a clutter of details? Should we not devote more attention to testing the spirits of our day, whether they be of God or not? Let me focus these questions for a moment on our synods. What if, as a refreshing pause in our lock-step adherence to parliamentary procedures, every year or two a session of synod were set aside for communal reflection on the big question: How are we doing in our spiritual running encounter with Enemy No. 1, SECULARISM? Could this be a way for synod to assume more fully and clearly its prophetic task? And what if such communal reflections on our common calling for such a time as this should result in occasional pastoral letters to our churches calling upon us to stand firm in the faith? Would this not be helpful in equipping the saints unto every good work? Once again, I simply lay the question before you.

I return now to a more explicit consideration of the C.T. This project is designed quite deliberately to help the churches fulfill their prophetic task in witnessing to the Reformed faith for our day. It began as a grass-roots idea, which was then moved along through the ranks of the churches. The concept was not imposed upon us from the top down. It was born out of local congregational initiative. Around 1970 a Canadian pastor preached a series of sermons on our three Reformed creeds. Through his preaching these confessional teachings came alive and took on new meaning for his people. Yet members of the congregation added the critical comment that, when read on their own, apart from good proclamation, these creeds no longer speak very clearly. These reactions set the pastor to thinking: Is it time to update our Reformation creeds? To restate the Biblical message in a more contemporary form? The pastor shared these concerns with his consistory. The consistory concurred, proposed to classis that a new confession be written, and from there the idea came as an overture to synod. Here, I think, is a case of Reformed church polity operating at its best. This confessional initiative set in motion nearly a decade of discussion (throughout

the seventies) concerning the necessity and desirability of such a venture. Now, in the eighties, we are beginning to reap the harvest of these earlier discussions.

I shall sidestep for now any comment on the text and content of the C.T. I believe, however, that the core idea of this undertaking merits our hearty support. Confession-writing is an ongoing task of the church. It is one aspect of the Reformation motto, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*. Biblically, we hold to a closed canon. But this commitment does not carry over to our confessions—(think, for example, of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession). Despite many appearances to the contrary, we endorse the idea of an open confessional tradition. In fact, confessions are one way of opening up the Scriptures in their address to the ever-new demands of succeeding generations, and of keeping us open to the Biblical message for our times. Thus contemporary re-statements of the Biblically Reformed faith can help prevent the closed canon from becoming a closed book.

In this respect the Reformed tradition stands in rather sharp contrast to a very conservative creedal tradition in Lutheranism, which has basically not moved beyond the “Augsburg Confession” of the sixteenth century. A commitment in principle to the legitimacy of ongoing confessional development is one of the distinctive marks of the Reformed heritage. We took note earlier of the Barmen Declaration. Well-known are also the “Confession of 1967” by the United Presbyterian Church, the “concept-creed” drafted by Ridderbos and Berkouwer for the Gereformeerde Kerken, the “Song of Hope” adopted by the Reformed Church in America, and “Our Testimony” written a few years ago by members of the Reformed Fellowship. In addition, a book appeared in 1982 entitled *Reformed Witness Today*—a compilation (with brief commentary) of some twenty-seven confessions arising out of world-wide Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the past quarter century. Now, in addition, we have also drafted our own C.T.

Reflecting critically upon these recent creedal developments, the C.T. Committee noted that “we have seen some efforts at confession-making that do not offer much encouragement: the 1967 document of the UPC generated controversy [due to the alleged intrusion of neo-orthodox teachings], and the attempts of the GKN seem to be stalled [due perhaps to

confessional indifference. . . . In short, while we note with dismay that confession-writing can lead to strife (UPC) or stalemate (GKN), there are also many indications that the time is ripe for a Reformed testimony to our present world."⁶

This brief survey forces upon us the question: Though others have failed, can the C.T. possibly help to bring about a measure of healing and greater unity? If not, then it too will fail in one of its major objectives. We cannot, of course, pre-determine the outcome. For "among us the authority of ecclesiastical documents always depends on their content, not on their signatories or solemn pronouncements." Therefore it would be premature "to define beforehand what measure of authority [the C.T.] ought to carry. We should simply proceed to do the work which we believe God requires. At a later date God's people will decide on the status of the testimony."⁷

If the C.T. is to have a healing and unifying effect, it must display the marks of a true confession. What are these marks? Listen to the following comments by well-known Reformed scholars on creedal integrity. H.N. Ridderbos: ". . . the renewal of a Christian confession [must] keep just as sharply in focus its continuity with the past as the demands for living today and in the future. The unity of the church of all times lies in the unity of its confession . . . [Yet] the same thing [*homolegein*] must once and again be said anew. This implies both continuity and renewal."⁸ L. Praamsma: "A true confession should express the common living faith of the church, the communion of the saints, and therefore be accepted spontaneously."⁹ A.D.R. Polman:

Confession means *publicity*: to confess means to go public . . . Herein lie the elements of inner compulsion, spontaneity, and happy thankfulness . . . To give a variant to a Russian proverb, you can no more hide your faith than you can smother a cough . . . Confession means *normativity* . . . Confession is always *forensic*: It is always a testimony, a giving account in a forum that is formed now by the world, and then by the church, sometimes by an earthly judge, and sometimes by God himself . . . A confession must display both *continuity* and concrete timeliness . . . [This] refers to the forensic character of confession in which a man gives testimony in his own time and in contemporary forms, thought patterns, and idioms . . . [For] on the one hand, timeliness without continuity leads to a

shoreless subjectivism or to identification with the spirit of the times in which the "entrusted charge" is abridged or even denied. On the other hand, continuity without timeliness leads to traditionalism, confessionalism, dead orthodoxy, or it becomes a retreat behind Chinese walls where one forgets the world and is punished by being forgotten by the world.¹⁰

Drawing upon these and similar insights from the Reformed confessional tradition, the C.T. Committee then adopted in advance (in 1979) the following creedal marks to govern its work.

First, we hope for a testimony that is boldly orthodox. [For] we believe that a testimony that confronts the apostasy of the present day should reaffirm the contents of the historic faith. [It should be] pointed enough to be of help in the contemporary argument, but also basic and orthodox, so that it commands the agreement of all Bible-believing Christians . . . Secondly, we believe that a contemporary testimony must be recognizable as an expression of Reformed piety . . . so that it may become a vehicle for, and stimulant to, the daily piety of God's people . . . Thirdly, we hope for a testimony that will articulate the kingdom vision of our unique strand of Calvinism. [Then] the testimony will not only join orthodoxy to piety, but also insist on the inseparable connection between "that which is to be believed" and "that which is to be done"—[thus, orthodoxy and orthopraxy]. Finally, . . . we hope that our testimony will be an ecclesiastical confession that addresses current issues. As such it will differ from declarations by groups dedicated to Christian political action or educational activity. Yet it should be supportive of such declarations. [Thus] the contemporary testimony must become the church's response to God's Word—the best and most obedient response we are able to give in the eighties."

In seeking to live up to the genius of all true confessions, the C.T. is intended to function in the following ways: (1) as a standard of creedal unity in the church, (2) as a witness to the world, (3) as a guide in worship, (4) as a teaching tool for inquirers and church members, and (5) as a test of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

In conclusion, what is contemporary about the C.T.? In what sense is it an updated restatement of the Reformation creeds? How does it differ from them? What changes have been introduced to meet the secular crisis of our day? In one sense it

may be said that nothing has been changed. In the words of the C.T. Committee, "It would be well to bear in mind that this task is not being undertaken because we find fault with the Three Forms of Unity . . . We are not motivated by a desire to criticize the work of our fathers, but we are compelled to build upon their confession, speaking the word of the Lord in our situation."¹² The C.T. bears the marks of continuity. Many of the familiar, time-tested affirmations of the past re-echo throughout the C.T. In this sense then there is no change. Nothing is different.

At the same time it is also unmistakably true that everything about the C.T. is different. Everywhere one encounters change—change in format, in manner of expression, in address to pressing issues, change especially in its overall orientation. As the Reformation creeds are oriented to the struggles of the sixteenth century, so, while their most relevant affirmations live on in the C.T., they are thoroughly reoriented to our contemporary secularized society. This is evident in all fifty-seven stanzas. There is renewal here, within continuity.

There are, however, also some significantly new points of emphasis in the C.T.—points of emphasis either absent or inadequately treated in our historic creeds, points of emphasis called forth by the contemporary situation which our fathers could not possibly have foreseen. Let me briefly sketch several of them.

1. The structure of the C.T. follows very deliberately the Biblical story-line of creation, fall, and redemption, on the way to the final consummation of all things. In the light of Scripture we see these crucial motifs emerging as the central turning points in world history. This historical-redemptive approach reflects the best tradition in Reformed hermeneutics as developed by Biblical scholars in our circles over especially the past century. The C.T. seeks to take full advantage of these very fruitful insights in Biblical interpretation.

2. The C.T. also offers an updated restatement on the doctrine of Scripture. It deals with the Bible, not in the prolegomenal way of conventional dogmatics, as a statement in advance introducing all the doctrines which follow, as in the Belgic Confession (Articles II-VII). Instead it deals with Scripture as God's saving revelation, integral to the full sweep of the history of redemption, as briefly sketched in the Heidelberg Catechism

(Q/A 19). Accordingly the C.T. locates its witness to Scripture under the heading of Redemption, within the context of Christ, the Spirit, and the Church. For Scripture is a fruit of salvation history, as well as a record of it and an instrument in it. In our secular society, moreover, the most urgent context for such a Biblical confession is no longer the question of Scripture and tradition, or that of canonical versus apocryphal books (as in the Belgic Confession). The contemporary crisis is rather this: What needs to be said (a) over against 19th and 20th century Biblical criticism, and (b) in response to dispensational movements which rend asunder the unity of the two Testaments? It is current challenges, such as these, which shape the form and content of the C.T.

3. The Biblical doctrine of creation receives far greater attention in the C.T. than in our present Reformed confessions. The latter stress the burning issues of the 16th century, namely, the various facets of the way of salvation. They stress redemption rather than creation. The Heidelberg Catechism, for instance, quietly bypasses creation in moving on to the fall (sin) and redemption (salvation and service). Even in its explanation of Article I of the Apostles Creed, there is only a passing, almost parenthetical reference to God's work of creation. This is, of course, wholly understandable, given the times. Whatever the differences then among Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and others, no one had yet arisen to challenge the Biblical teachings on *creatio ex nihilo*. Now that Darwin has done his work, and evolutionism has taken over the field, it would be wholly inexcusable for a contemporary testimony to say no more than our fathers said. The C.T. therefore aims at bringing this historic article of faith into the twentieth century and, in doing so, spelling out some of its implications for our stewardship of creational resources.

4. Ridderbos reminds us in his monumental work that the central, unifying theme which best captures the fullness of Biblical revelation is "the coming of the kingdom." In another place, however, he concedes that

in the Reformed confessions the kingdom of God is not treated with great comprehensiveness; nor can one say that it occupies a dominating place in the structure of these confessions . . .

The central significance which the kingdom of God has, for example, in the preaching of Jesus is not shown to full advantage here and in the Catechism as a whole. Other motifs govern the structure of those Reformed confessions.¹³

This shortcoming (as we see it) is also readily understandable: It grows out of the prevailing church/state relations of the sixteenth century. That consideration cannot, however, stand as the last word. In this respect too the C.T. seeks to further reform the work of the Reformers. Note one of the opening lines of the section on the church in its societal outreach: "The rule of Jesus Christ embraces the universe." In our present day encounters with the bad news of secularism the C.T. therefore posits the Good News of the coming kingdom, embodied in its theme, "our world belongs to God."

5. As many have noted, our Reformed creeds lack a strong emphasis on the mission of the church, both as institute and as people of God in the midst of the world. Again, this is understandably so, given the limited horizons of the sixteenth century outlook upon the world. Their confessional concerns were confined largely to western Europe. They operated moreover, on the assumption of the *Corpus Christianum*, namely, that in general all the peoples and institutions within their purview were somehow Christian. Some even argued that the mission mandate ceased with the end of the apostolic age. Clearly we can no longer go on these assumptions. Therefore, on this count too the C.T. seeks to enlarge our vision of the church's mission in and to and for the world.

6. Our twentieth century has been called an eschatological, even apocalyptic age. On this score too our Reformed creeds offer only a remotely relevant address to "end time" issues as we experience them today. And once more we must add, understandably so. To think eschatologically means to think historically. The modern historical mind, with which we must contend today, did not emerge forcefully until well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In our times, however, historicism has succeeded in spawning a motley array of futurologies—some utopian, others forecasting doomsday, still others proclaiming an approaching rapture together with detailed blueprints of the restoration of Israel and an impending millennium. These contemporary

challenges too lie beyond the scope of our sixteenth century confessions. However belatedly, therefore, the C.T. aims to carry forward the (necessarily) unfinished confessional task of our fathers.

The centerpiece of this conference is the two-sided theme, "orthodoxy and orthopraxis." No confession, whether ancient or contemporary, and however orthodox and ortho-practical, can possibly offer a panacea for all our ills. Creeds too have their limitations. Often other concerns in the life of the Christian community are more decisive in shaping the prevailing orthodoxy-heterodoxy and orthopraxy-heteropraxy than its confessions. As one of my former colleagues used to say: You may write the creeds we recite, but let me write the songs we sing! Nevertheless, the question confronting us now is this: In terms of right doctrine and right practice, can the C.T. possibly make at least some small contribution to a much needed healing and unifying ministry within the Reformed community today?

Notes

1. *1977 Acts of Synod*, p. 89.
2. *1972 Acts of Synod*, pp. 411-412.
3. *1979 Acts of Synod*, p. 347.
4. *1977 Acts of Synod*, p. 659.
5. *1979 Acts of Synod*, p. 348.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *1979 Acts of Synod*, pp. 356-357.
8. *International Reformed Bulletin*, No. 42, 1970, p. 6.
9. *RES Theological Bulletin*, Vol. III, No. 3, 1975.
10. *International Reformed Bulletin*, No. 60, 1975, pp. 25-27.
11. *1979 Acts of Synod*, pp. 349-350.
12. *1979 Acts of Synod*, p. 356.
13. *International Reformed Bulletin*, No. 27, 1966, p. 9.

Why Apartheid Is Not a Heresy

Henry Vander Goot

Introduction

This essay has three parts. In the first I shall consider the decision of the general Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (hereafter, CRC) of 1984 declaring Apartheid a heresy. What is the significance of this event in CRC history? What brought it about and what does it tell us about the CRC's present state of consciousness?

The second part of this essay concerns the more crucial matter of whether it is appropriate to regard Apartheid as a heresy. In this part I shall examine the idea of heresy, what the so-called *status confessionis* (a situation of confessional urgency) is in the light of which Apartheid was declared a heresy in certain South African churches, and where the theological antecedents to this ecclesiastical action are to be located.

In the final part of this essay I shall take up the problem of Apartheid itself totally apart from the church and the ecclesiastical ways in which it is being dealt with. In this part I shall consider whether Apartheid qualifies as a Christian political philosophy, and what its pros and cons are from the vantage point of biblical revelation and the historical realities of the human situation in South Africa (hereafter, SA).

The CRC Decision on Apartheid of the Synod of 1984

Background

The action of the CRC Synod of 1984 giving an affirmative answer to the self-formulated question "Is Apartheid a

Heresy?"¹ was occasioned by the recommendations of the Synod's Interchurch Relations Committee (hereafter, IRC). The immediate context of the decision was the Committee's consideration of the actions of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (hereafter, the WARC, of which the CRC is not a member) taken at the meeting of its General Council in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in August of 1982 and of the subsequent actions of the *Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Sendingkerk* (hereafter, NGSK), an ecclesiastical body in SA with which the CRC maintains official fellowship. In 1982 at its Synod in Belhar, Capetown, SA, the NGSK declared a so-called *status confessionis* with regard to Apartheid. In addition, this Synod of the NGSK promulgated a new confession (hereafter, the Belhar Confession) specifically in the light of the crisis situation and moment of decision perceived to obtain in SA because of the persisting defense of Apartheid in the major Reformed churches there. It should be noted here that in their official pronouncements the WARC and the NGSK (in slightly different language) declared that "apartheid ('separate development') is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy."²

If the charges of the WARC and of the NGSK are correct, so the IRC argued, the allegations that several Reformed denominations in SA are therefore false churches must be considered by the CRC since it maintains ecclesiastical fellowship with all the parties involved. Maintaining fellowship with these alleged false churches would apparently reflect badly on the CRC. Hence, the IRC "appointed an *ad hoc* committee consisting of Dr. John Kromminga, Dr. John Stek, Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Dr. Henry Zwaanstra 'to study the question of whether apartheid is a heresy.'"³ We should note that this is the exact formulation of the matter by the IRC itself.

Within the same year the *ad hoc* committee submitted a report to the IRC entitled "Is Apartheid a Heresy?" The report was adopted by the IRC and in turn submitted to the CRC Synod of 1984, which adopted the work of the *ad hoc* subcommittee without much debate.

Following the WARC (1982) and the Belhar Synod of the NGSK (1982), this report declares that where the church sup-

ports and/or does not oppose the ideology of Apartheid after it has been persistently exposed, a *status confessionis* concerning this matter must surely be acknowledged.⁴ Furthermore, the report declares that "any church that supports or warrants such an ideology in the name of the Word of God is untrue to the Word of God, and the teaching it propounds in support or defense of such an ideology must be judged heretical." A brief footnote asserts that "By 'heresy (heretical)' we mean a theological view or doctrine that is in conflict with the teachings of Scripture as interpreted by the Reformed confessions."

The Significance of the Action

At this juncture we should pause to take stock of what has happened by virtue of the official promulgation of this report on Apartheid by the CRC Synod of 1984. By virtue of the report's official adoption, there has, I believe, taken place a major turning point in the history of the CRC's official decisions. Let me call attention to some of the significant aspects/ramifications of this event.

First, the significance of this event remains unclear to the vast majority of members of the CRC, including its institutional leaders, as well as to the IRC and the authors of the adopted statement. This failure to appreciate the import of what was done can be seen from the carelessness that characterizes the adopted statement in relation to the gravity of its allegations. However, at this point I would call attention only to the carelessness with which the report was promulgated by the Synod of 1984.

The report's hasty adoption reflects a well-intentioned but nevertheless politically naive lack of self-awareness, theological as well as personal. The IRC did *not* submit the *ad hoc* committee's work, with all of the difficult and serious theological matters at stake in it, to the churches for their consideration, comment, and debate. From this procedure one derives the impression that the IRC supposed (probably also naively) that there was nothing to discuss, dissent from its report being inconceivable. Or there might have been the attitude that churches and theologians have debated the matter at hand far too long already and that it is therefore now time to start "doing"

something. A less benevolent interpretation would be that the CRC is being increasingly infected by doctrinal indifference coupled with a self-assured and sometimes even arrogant moral indignation of the social and political variety. Under the latter circumstances dissent becomes viewed as an irritant as well as an obstacle to the advance of reigning prejudices. The most effective response to such irritation or tension is to ignore it, provided adequate control of the channels of power allows this to happen.

In a style the CRC is becoming all too accustomed to, reports and documents are composed by committees of carefully selected members who speak their mind on a given matter. If the matter at hand happens not to be the focus of the Synod's attention in that particular year (as was most surely the case in 1984 with respect to the report on Apartheid), the membership and work of these committees are assured no serious and probing dissent. The committee structure of the Synod and the method of "expertly" prepared reports in which committee members are given a forum to advance their version of the matter at hand with the apparent authorization of the church is fast becoming an oppressive rule from the top down heretofore unexperienced in the CRC. A bureaucratic fortress of defense is being created for the views of a new leadership of CRC "experts" who self-perpetuate their members on the major committees of the Synod. I fear that the membership of the IRC's subcommittee which produced the report on Apartheid bears this out all too well. Moreover, this also explains how the predominantly conservative membership of the CRC has come to be represented by synods and committees whose recent major decisions have been close votes at best, if they have not gone directly in a leftward direction. Why else five committees on women in office? All the relevant biblical material was dealt with the first time. I fear that this can only be explained by the liberal mind in action: rule or ruin.

Second, for the first time in its history the CRC has expressly declared certain teaching to be specifically heretical. This in itself is historic enough to cause us to pause and take a second look. Given the CRC's recent history in particular, this decision should stand out in bold relief from its theological environment. When I attended Calvin College in the mid sixties, "heresy hunting" came in for ritualistic lampooning by teachers and

students alike; yet the same leadership of the church has just taken the opportunity to put a foot down without any obvious long-suffering and anguish, and that on a matter at best only obliquely confessional and only marginally related to our own concrete situation in North America. However, on other occasions CRC synods have fretted to avoid the application even of the mildest forms of accountability and rebuke to preachers and teachers of the church whose views have come under serious question. The CRC seems tired of theology and doctrinal controversy; one might say it has emerged from the stage of doctrinal consciousness.

So when a leading pastor of the CRC publically casts aspersions on the so-called "militant mind" in the church,⁵ it should strike one as odd that the IRC and the Synod of 1984 would militantly pronounce certain teachings as heretical and direct their glare at Afrikaner Calvinists. Surely the irony of this situation ought to be obvious to all. But the fact that it is not significantly reflects the state of consciousness of the CRC's present leadership. Indeed, the show of conviction undergirding the report on Apartheid of the 1984 Synod is uncharacteristic of the psychological climate of the past decades and must surely create in the observer a strong sense of irony.

The third factor deserving consciousness-raising comment is the extremely significant shift that this decision on Apartheid represents from norming judgment in the church on the basis of orthodoxy (right confession) to so-called orthopraxis. This shift, I would contend, has no foundation in the Reformed tradition, but draws its impetus from extra- and anti-Calvinist sources. The larger context for this shift is the climate of opinion created in the mainline denominations by the World Council of Churches (hereafter, WCC). In the WCC it has been taken for granted for decades that creeds divide while deeds unite; Christians may not be able to agree on doctrine but surely there are things in the world that obviously ought to be done and actions that ought obviously to be opposed. But because it is difficult to know *which* things and actions in the world are to be the church's concern, in the WCC's actual ecclesiology an essentially Catholic notion of the church has, ironically, prevailed. Let me explain by reproducing the implicit line of reasoning: since the gospel has relevance with respect to life in its entirety, it has

often been thought that the church's competence is universal, extending not only to practical matters outside of the church but to all those in which so-called moral issues are at stake. This is, I would contend, the major *non-sequitur* of WCC theology and the mainline Protestant denominations. It is, moreover, I believe, one of the ambiguities inherent in the 1984 CRC decision on the political philosophy of Apartheid. That decision is defensible only on the assumption of an ecclesiology that thinks in terms of a leftist praxis-theory conception and whose sense of institutional limits has become undone by a generalizing kingdom vision yielding a view of the institutional church as omnicompetent.

Considered from several angles, the 1984 decision on Apartheid expresses an ecclesiology and view of Christian witness by the church in the social order that contravenes the best institutional and biblical thinking of the Calvinist tradition. This can be suspected from the fact that the major indigenously South African ecclesiastical criticisms of Apartheid have originated in the Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist churches of that land; just as the major political alternatives to Apartheid in SA originated in the traditions of British political thought and prejudice. These South African criticisms coming from the churches can, furthermore, be shown to draw heavily on liberal and neo-liberal forms of Protestant theology. In addition those criticisms that are decorated with biblical citations can be shown to rely heavily on higher critical literature. I give as a prime example of this the recent book of John deGruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, entitled *Apartheid is a Heresy*.⁶ The sources of the ecclesiastical and biblical criticisms are Desmond Tutu and Gerhard von Rad, not John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper.

Finally, before I deal with the problem proper of confession and heresy, a few comments can be made here about the CRC decision that form a natural transition to the second part of this essay. Reflecting heavily the statements of the WARC 1982 and of the Belhar Synod (NGSK, 1982), the CRC document of 1984 declares a *status confessionis* with respect to the continuing support of Apartheid within the church. (For our immediate purposes, by declaring itself as being *in statu confessionis*, a church declares that it perceives its confessions to be threatened and in jeopardy.)

Now it is surely understandable how certain South African churches might in their situation of trial and conflict be moved, after much suffering and anguish, to declare such a state as pertaining in their churches. What grave moment in the CRC's own concrete situation could possibly be responsible for the announcement of this revelation in Grand Rapids? How could the CRC in good conscience repeat the words of the NGSK and not thereby demean the sense in which those words were uttered in their situation of origination? The CRC might simply have said that it was right for the NGSK to have declared itself to be in such a state. But what could have been on the *ad hoc* committee's mind to leave it unclear whether the CRC is simply acknowledging that such a situation pertains in SA or whether the CRC itself, as the NGSK, is *in statu confessionis* with respect to Apartheid? Naturally, the authors of this report risked this ambiguity when they modeled their words on the resolutions of the WARC (1982) and Belhar. In so far as the CRC has adopted the report, there is every right to assume that it fatuously imagines itself in a confessional situation similar to that of its fellow churches in SA.

To understand how a social-political point of view (wrong as it possibly is) might be construed as a challenge to the confession, we shall shortly consider the meaning and provenance of the *in statu confessionis* idea. Here suffice it to say that the WARC, Belhar, and the CRC Synod of 1984 all realized, at least in part, that it would be meaningless even on the face of it to characterize as heretical what could not first be construed as confessional; thus the need to declare that advocacy of Apartheid by Christian churches threatens the confession.

But because it is impossible to say how and at what point the confession comes directly into play in the social order, even most of the ecclesiastical opponents of Apartheid disagree among themselves both as to which Christian confession is denied in the justification of Apartheid and as to what false teachings the Afrikaners advance in their advocacy of separate cultural development.⁷ The CRC report therefore resorts to the distinction between the ideology of Apartheid itself and "the teachings (a church) propounds in support or defense of such an ideology."⁸ Those teachings can conflict with creeds of the Reformed faith and it is thus *only those teachings*, according to

the Synod, that can be considered heretical. Apparently then Apartheid itself is not a heresy. Thus far the Synod of 1984.

Yet this distinction which the CRC report introduces is, and has proven itself to be, a meaningless and ineffective bromide. First, the IRC and the *ad hoc* committee themselves ignored the distinction once the impression was made that heresy is only conceivable within the orbit of the institutional church and its confession. In spite of the distinction, the IRC posed to the *ad hoc* committee the question "whether apartheid is a heresy?"⁹ Moreover, in its *Acts of 1984* the Synod promulgated the committee's report under the title "Apartheid as a Heresy."¹⁰ On the report's own terms the answer to the IRC's initial question should have been negative. But no one has read the report to mean anything of the kind, as the subsequent plethora of church bulletin announcements, magazine articles, and publishers titles amply attests.¹¹

The reason is that this outcome was intended all along, as is clearly to be seen from the speech of Allan Boesak at the WARC 1982 first giving rise to the subsequent official pronouncements of Belhar and the CRC. Boesak's speech to the WARC assembly appears in a volume edited by John deGruchy and Charles Villavicencio. The title *Apartheid is a Heresy* reflects the volume's content accurately. In a foreword to the volume, Boesak declares: "The Church has dared to call apartheid a heresy."¹² Later, in the conclusion of his printed address, Boesak leaves his hearers with a piece of illogic that would be the envy of any teacher doing a first lesson on classic fallacies. Having declared racism a sin and having pronounced Apartheid to be a form of racism, Boesak exhorts the WARC to "declare that apartheid . . . is 'irreconcilable with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.'" And, he continues, "If this is true, and if apartheid is also a denial of the Reformed tradition, then it should be declared a heresy that is to the everlasting shame of the Church of Jesus Christ."¹³ The report's reception reproduced its origins. The 1980-81 Multicultural Lectureship of Allan Boesak at Calvin College and the close personal ties he then established with the CRC's institutional leaders go a long way in explaining not only why the IRC initiated its recent work on Apartheid but also the material content itself of the final report.

Finally, the lack of seriousness the report displays can also

be seen from yet another angle. If it is the case that only the teachings used by the church in support of Apartheid can be judged heretical, then naturally before such teachings can be so judged, it remains incumbent on the prosecution to demonstrate what those teachings are and that they are being promulgated. Yet the CRC report does neither. Is it really too much to expect that the opponents of Apartheid should tell us what the false teachings are that the CRC has pronounced heretical? Or were the members of this committee so (uncharacteristically) sure of themselves and the righteousness of their doings that the false views of the alleged heretics did not even require stating before being denounced as heretical? The report leaves it to our imagination to guess what these heresies might be.

The CRC was thus called on to declare heretical teachings it has never seen, teachings the report does not even bother to detail. The committee did not bother to detail these teachings, inexcusable as that is, because it could not have found any; for, strictly speaking, no explicit denial or revision of any part of the historic confessions of the Christian faith has ever been thought necessary to warrant the idea of Apartheid. Suspecting this inconvenient possibility, the report of the *ad hoc* committee, locked into a well-nigh ludicrous logic of mistakes, suggests a final criterion of heresy that it at least had enough sense to try to hide in a footnote. Even "unobjectionable" teachings, we are informed, can be heretical if put to use in the defense of the "absolutization of race."¹⁴ The incarnation, the Trinity, the *homoousious* of the Son with the Father—heresies if put to use in the defense of a false ideology!?? The novelty of this insight is matched only by the pickings and choosings of the heretic's own deviant opinions.

With the Apartheid decision the CRC has clearly broken with norming judgment in the institutional church on the basis of confession. Here the CRC has opened a veritable Pandora's box of controversy over a whole range of possible issues that will henceforth, on the basis of this precedent, only be able to be adjudicated synodically in a political manner. This has of course already happened in major mainline Protestant denominations on which the CRC has begun to model itself. Everything will depend on which side can get the most votes to see its version of kingdom vision ecclesiastically authorized. Moreover, nothing, I

fear, will dishearten the orthodox wing of the CRC more, forcing it to consider institutional alternatives. I express this caution out of genuine concern for the unity of the church.

Heresy and the Idea of the In Statu Confessionis

What Is a Heresy?

Before progress can be made in analyzing the problem of current ecclesiastical responses to Apartheid, a number of distinctions and definitions of terms is simply necessary. The authors of the 1984 report tell us in one brief footnote what they mean by heresy, defining it as "a theological view or doctrine that is in conflict with the teachings of Scripture as interpreted by the Reformed confessions."¹⁵

One is immediately struck by the conflation of two concepts under the single term "heresy" in this definition, a conflation paralleling the major *non-sequitur* of WCC theology referred to above. Notice that in this definition the problem of conflict with Scripture is immediately coupled with contravention of the creeds. A crucial distinction is thus blurred. The universal relevance of the biblical revelation is one thing; the specific use and application of that revelation in the institutional church quite another. It does not follow from the former that the church as institution among others within society is a center around which all problems can be handled or resolved. The idea of a socially imposed ecclesiastical center may be good Catholicism, but it is not good Protestant Christianity. By contrast to Catholicism, Protestantism represents the idea of a free church and a corresponding view of the social order as freed from the centering effect, including and especially the ecclesiastical variety. The institutional church is not the only agent of the kingdom, nor is it the only bearer of the biblical revelation!

With this clearly before our minds, we must address the problem of what a heresy is. First there is the fact of the teachings of the biblical revelation itself. These teachings are indeed relevant to everything in life. They are religious and possess an unqualified significance and universal applicability. For ex-

ample, the teachings can be connected up with the various scientific disciplines in the area of learning. Each discipline develops and designs theories that can be judged to be either compatible or incompatible with that revelation. But such connection makes these theories neither theological nor ecclesiastical and confessional.

That compatibility/incompatibility can, moreover, only be demonstrated by *indirection*, that is, on the basis of elaborated arguments that work from out of the Bible; for the scientific disciplines typically work with the biblical revelation for what it implies in any given field. Thus, for example, the philosophy of linguistic analysis might be said to be incompatible with biblical revelation. But it would be badly straining the concept of heresy to allege that linguistic analysis is heretical and that its practitioners in Christian colleges are heretics. The philosophy of linguistic analysis does not even intend to be a creed! Moreover, its connection with revelation being indirect, the alleged compatibility/incompatibility requires a sustained argument demonstrating that either this philosophy's assumptions or intellectual consequences oppose the implications of biblical revelation.

There exist, therefore, actions, theories, and ideas that might be judged wrong and even indirectly in conflict with the biblical revelation. These are all latent, unformulated falsifications of the standards of biblical revelation. But, strictly speaking, these are not by that token heresies. To transfer the notion of heresy either to theoretical realms in which revelation operates only generally or to other realms of praxis than the church's (say to so-called ethical or practical matters) is to confuse heresy with secondary, derivative, and minute falsifications of revelation, by which standard we would all be heretics most of the time.

Hence, the concept of heresy, to retain any meaning at all, must be limited to explicit, formal, culpable heresy. Moreover, it must be understood also in its legal and dogmatic sense and so must be seen to concern specifically the creeds and confessions of the church. To define heresy in its traditional and technical sense, the role of the institutional church and its confessional tradition must be kept strictly in mind. In the institutional church, where the idea of heresy has its proper home, heresy

refers to a confession or a dogma that is in conflict with the "confessions." Only a confession can be rightly opposed to an alternative confession.

In order to maintain the traditional and technical definition of heresy, we must confine its use within the parameters of the institutional church, its creeds, and its confessional tradition. Where the teaching of Scripture bears on actions or ideas outside of the orbit of the institutional church, limits have been reached, and where heretical pronouncements fall on actions and ideas outside the orbit of the church, these limits have been breached. Moreover, where conflict between Scripture and human actions or ideas can only be established by indirection, another limit must be acknowledged if we are to avoid carelessness and arbitrariness in the use of the concept of heresy. There are matters with respect to the combat of which the church is simply incompetent and helpless, being limited to pointing out pros and cons. In these matters the church may neither declare that the confession is at stake nor may it sniff around for heresies in every corner. Therefore, it seems to me that the statement "apartheid is a heresy" is at best an emotive one expressing in the strongest terms a cry for justice and a moral protest against the existing order in SA. However, as a (theo-)logical judgment it remains false even on the face of it and represents a rather simpleminded, naive, and even dangerous confusion of contexts of meaning.

Moreover, since the proliferation of confessions within Christianity and thus of widespread dissension within the institutional church's tradition itself, one man's orthodoxy has become another man's heterodoxy. To avoid unnecessary narrowness of conception as to what constitutes heresy within the church, I believe that the least arbitrary criteria of orthodoxy must be sought where the churches of Christianity have displayed maximal consensus, and thus in the classical ecumenical confessions of the Early Church, as Thomas Oden has argued effectively in a recent book.¹⁶

I believe it important to put these limits on heresy's applicability because of the gravity attending its use. The not-holding of the truth implied by traditional heresy entailed both the loss of the Christian name (*non retinere nomen christianum*) and the loss of eternal salvation. Thus, for example, though I

would not hesitate to regard as heresy anti-trinitarian alternatives to Nicea's definition of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, one might hesitate, as I believe the Reformed churches have, to regard, say, the tenth article of the Augsburg Confession on the real bodily presence and distribution of Christ in the eucharist to all communicants as heretical, even though the Reformed tradition disapproves of this teaching. The archetypal heresies are primarily Trinitarian and Christological.¹⁷ Let us then stick to this in the church and for the rest simply call Apartheid a dubious idea!

The long and short of this illustration is that a denial of the universal, undoubted Christian and apostolic faith is a much more specific matter either than disagreement among the various Christian traditions or than coming into conflict with Scripture. Both in the case of conflict with the apostolic confession and in the case of conflict with Scripture, we can speak of the commission of a wrong. But only in the case of the former should we speak specifically of the sin of heresy. Though analytic philosophy undoubtedly represents a false view of man and reason, even conflicting with the biblical revelation, it is not a heresy. And it is not a heresy both because it is a theory and not a confession and because its connection with revelation is indirect, requiring an elaborated argument involving subjective judgment to show its incompatibility with the Christian witness.

I conclude then that not everything one might dissent from or disapprove of, even on a biblical basis, is a heresy. Moreover, to ignore this and to fail to point out the false confession before rejecting it will lead to a dangerous politicizing of the church. To transfer the notion of heresy either to theoretical realms in which revelation operates only generally or to realms of praxis other than the church's will lead either to such serious dissension over an unlimited range of issues that the church will be reduced to political sects who gain the upper hand, or to heretofore unparalleled fragmentation.¹⁸ Moreover, the shift to use of the concept of heresy and the *in statu confessionis* in practical matters outside of the institutional church will surely accelerate the treatment of the norms of confession and doctrine with indifference and uninterested acceptance. In addition the political action and consciousness thus engendered in the church will be bound to the

infantile, merely substituting syrupy charity for the violence of past doctrinal debates.

*The Aberrant Application of Heresy
to Non-Confessional Practices*

In the first part of this section I examined the idea of heresy, noting the problems raised by current formulations and suggesting that traditional limits and criteria should be adhered to. In the next section I will inquire into the origins of the current misconceptions, noting their provenance, their historical manifestations, and their implications for Reformed theology today.

If the limits that I propose we should adhere to are indigenous to Reformed thought and belong to the best of the Christian tradition, then whence the current aberrations plaguing even Reformed bodies? A sustained inquiry will show that these aberrations receive their impetus and form from non-Reformed Protestant thought. It is precisely in non-Reformed Protestant thought that the boundaries between church and society, theory and confession, are transgressed because ecclesiasticism remains the only effective means known for opposing wrong. Proper opposition, it is assumed, requires the weight of ecclesiastical authority; hence the need to draw issues of all kinds into the orbit of the church. The synodical declaration that Apartheid is a heresy represents exactly such an ecclesiasticism, undermining truly effective and data-relevant integrations of Christian faith and the concerns of the economic, social, and political orders. Let me elaborate on the notion of the *in statu confessionis* then as representing an essentially non-Reformed view of church and Christian witness in the social order.

It is no coincidence that a *status confessionis* with respect to Apartheid was first expressly declared by a *Lutheran* assembly in SA, which became the immediate precedent for similar actions taken by other church bodies shortly thereafter.¹⁹ The very idea itself, formally speaking, has its natural place and home in Lutheran thought. According to this idea God's revelation impinges on human life especially at certain important moments, which modern theology frequently refers to with the New Testament concept of *kairos*. At these contingent moments in time a

situation calling for decision must be acknowledged to pertain. In case of the *in statu confessionis*, the decisive situation involves a perceived clearcut threat to the confession of the church. In this declared state the traditional boundaries of Lutheran theology are suspended in order adequately to confront the crisis at hand. Viewpoints or actions normally treated as indifferent to the gospel are suddenly subsumed under the church's jurisdiction. Hence the traditional Lutheran formula: *in statu confessionis nihil est adiaphoron* (in the state of confession, nothing is indifferent). Under certain crucial circumstances the strict separation between the realm of the gospel and the realm of the law, the heavenly and earthly kingdoms, breaks down. That moment or situation is acknowledged to obtain when the church declares that it is *in statu confessionis*.

But all of this presupposes that generally speaking, under normal circumstances, in the realm of things civil and rational, things are adiaphora, that is, unconnected with the gospel. According to the Lutheran tradition, gospel and law should not be confused; neither is the gospel intended to be legislated nor the law preached. In the realm of the law (the earthly realm in which men live in relation to one another in society) reason functions well enough on its own. The most typical manner in which this has come to expression in Lutheran institutional theory is in the notion that the form of worship and liturgy in the church is a matter of local choice, that discipline is not a mark of the true church, and that the church's mundane affairs can legitimately be handled by the government that rules in its particular territory.

But one man's rationality in "things mundane" is another's irrationality. Reason in things civil has had a history. Moreover, that history is sometimes a rather unsavory one, at which point only stubbornness and blindness could cause one to fail to acknowledge a connection with the gospel in a realm that is thought otherwise to be indifferent. Unlike the Lutheran view, in the Reformed tradition of which we and the Afrikaner churches are a part, though several areas of society are distinguishable from the institutional church, no area is separable from the immediate applicability of revelation. In principle there is no *adiaphoron*.

The great misfortune of the Lutheran evangelical tradition

in Europe, which has set the stage for the theology of the WCC in which orthodoxy is forever confused with orthopraxis, is that to oppose anything on the basis of Scripture, it must first be drawn into the matrix of the institutional church and its characteristic way of dealing with things. Hence a Protestant version of ecclesiasticism has become unavoidable in most European nations other than in the Netherlands of a half century ago. Nowhere has this unfortunate fact come to more tragic expression than in Lutheran Germany in the 1930's and 40's under the National Socialists. When Hitler came to power in 1933 he set out to align every facet of German society with Nazism. However, he ran into pockets of opposition to *Gleichschaltung* from the German churches. An organized segment of the Protestant church met at Barmen in 1934 and in a situation of emergency publically denounced the Nazis and promulgated a statement which has become known as the Barmen Confession.

It is no coincidence that the similarity between the situation of the churches in Germany under Hitler and the situation of the churches in SA has become celebrated.²⁰ For many South Africans the Barmen Confession has become a model to emulate. But—and this is my main concern at this point—little attention is paid to the overall conception of the church and Christian witness in the world that made Barmen possible and finally condemned it to ineffectiveness. Though in part unavoidable for reasons of emergency, there seemed to remain to Protestant opponents of Nazism only a ecclesiastical way of dealing critically with National Socialism. Whether the ecclesiastical mode ought therefore even yet today to be viewed as the primary avenue of Christian witness in the social order is unclear both from a systematic point of view and from how the prime movers at Barmen understood their own efforts. Suffice it to say here that the same general conception of church and world that was typical of the Barmen theologians also undergirds the ecclesiastical critiques of Apartheid in SA. It is both tragic and ironic that most Reformed bodies (including and particularly the CRC) have either not noticed this or not bothered to resist it in any way. At least some in the NGSK of SA which adopted the Belhar Confession partially acknowledge the *emergency* (and a-normative) character of their action and thus that such declarations are abnormal and bound to have un-

satisfactory consequences.²¹ But no such insight, fleeting and in passing though it is, characterizes the CRC report. To the contrary, the CRC Synod of 1984 by its decision on Apartheid asked its members to take part in the devastation of the best thinking in its own tradition on the question of church and world, and that probably for no other major reason than that white Afrikanerdom shares this tradition with it. (Personally, I cannot avoid the suspicion that self-hate is a deep-seated theme in the psyche of the CRC.)

What should strike us about the theology both of Barmen and Belhar is the rejection of political and social ideas on the basis of the confession of the church. Noteworthy especially of this approach, or better, lack of any real or penetrating approach, are two characteristics in particular. The first is the deeply felt conviction that the wrongs of the world are finally most strongly combated by drawing them into the orbit of the institutional church. This is done by acknowledging a so-called *status confessionis* to obtain and in turn denouncing the alleged false idea or practice as heretical and thus as in conflict with the church's own ideas. By force of the *non-sequitur* theology of modern Protestant ecclesiasticism, the state becomes metamorphized into an anti-Christian counter-church or Apartheid into a psuedo-gospel to be resolutely opposed.

The second closely related and unavoidable characteristic of the ecclesiastical and Christ-centered critiques of society is the fact that no specific political principle constructed on empirical analysis of the state or the social and political order is invoked to counter either National Socialist political thought or the idea of separate cultural development. The religious concepts of the Bible are directly, in a verbally realist and well-nigh magical sense, contrasted to political philosophies and practices; or political notions are metamorphized into quasi-religious alternatives to the confessions of the church. For example, Karl Barth derives an alleged political theory of justice and the state from the theological doctrine of justification;²² or Anabaptist pacifists like John Yoder extract a politics directly out of the Bible, usually restrictively reduced to the words of Jesus. Yet only intrinsically relevant arguments and apologias are adequate to and commensurate with political ideologies and practices. Moreover, tragically enough, to make matters well-nigh ir-

reparably worse, the whole effort of constructing such empirically relevant political arguments on a general, Christian revelational and biblical basis is viewed by Christocentrists through the lens of the pro-Nazi ideology of the German Christians and by the South African and British ecclesiastical critics of Apartheid through the Afrikaner Calvinist and Kuyperian Christian philosophy of creation orders that undergirds it. Thus as many have now come to realize in the case of Barth and Barmen, the Confessing Church's efforts were condemned to speculation and ineptitude.²³

Sadly I must concur then with the thesis of Theodore Gill concerning the Church Struggle in Germany that Barmen was never the real basis for resistance to the Nazis and that it is therefore largely ignored by secular historians of the period.²⁴ Barmen was not only too little too late; it was in effect the wrong thing. (There should have been placed over against National Socialist philosophy a Christianly reformulated philosophy of the created structure of justice and the state.) Accordingly, Gill argues that we must look to liberal humanism for sources to oppose Nazism. In fact, Gill notes, the real leaders of resistance to Hitler were the agnostics, atheists, and communists of the period.²⁵ Furthermore, and this is the most stunning claim of all made by Gill and actually borne out by much recent study of Barth's specifically political involvements, even Christocentric theologians were really motivated by Enlightenment thought and thus a "natural theology" in the form of philosophy.²⁶

The Question of Apartheid as a Christian Idea of the State

In the final part of this essay I wish to consider a matter that should be the focus of attention in the first place, namely separate cultural development in the SA situation today. The merits/demerits of Apartheid as such must be debated as a *political philosophy* and especially as one that claims compatibility with biblical revelation. However, the difficulties attending such an analysis are well-nigh insurmountable in the West, given the moronic attitude toward Afrikanerdom that has been created by the modern, western, Anglo-British media.

Unable to deal with views and positions that conflict with its moral aprioris, modern media thinks in simple black and white terms about the SA situation. There are no questions to ask, no pros and cons to weigh, only indignation to vent in an imperialist fashion that parallels the way in which the Anglos of SA beat the Afrikaners into submission to British standards of value at the turn of the century.

It is a miracle at all that now and then again someone gets a word in edgewise about Afrikanerdom and SA that sheds much needed new light on the complexities of the situation there and its history. (That history the dominant British culture of the West has successfully silenced and obfuscated.) For example, in a recent book entitled *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism*, its author, Irving Hexham, has shown that it is simply historical shortsightedness, convenient for Anglos, to regard Afrikaners in SA as oppressors pure and simple.²⁷ Hexham demonstrates interestingly that the theory of Apartheid was developed by Dopper Calvinists in the nineteenth century in their attempt to resist being swallowed up by British imperialism. In a series of conflicts between the British and the earlier Dutch Calvinist settlers, which culminated in the Boer Wars in which British concentration camps hit the scene of modern history, the British attempted to assimilate the Dutch by forcing English language education on them and promoting an evangelical, Christ-centered theology which made valueless the structures of creation, such as nation, vocation, language and the visible church. In this way in SA, as elsewhere around the globe (one need only think of India), the British subtly spread contempt for non-Anglo ways and used their political majority to enforce it. Hexham shows how the Dopper Calvinists resisted assimilation by identifying themselves as a separate people on the model of the ancient Hebrews and on the model of the Old Testament emphasis on the need for theocratic institutions: separate schools, church discipline, political organizations, and their own language. This Apartheid movement applied to themselves actually created Afrikaans as a distinctive language, a feat anticipating many of the revivals of ethnic and racial identity of the last decades. Thus Hexham explains how the theory of Apartheid emerged in the struggle for freedom of an oppressed

Dutch people and must help us in turn see at a more profound level than was heretofore possible the irony of the use of Apartheid in the present situation. At worst the Afrikaner people is an oppressed oppressor, not unlike the Jewish people of the state of Israel today.

A service for our understanding of Apartheid similar to Hexham's has also been provided by the 1968 book of Paul Schrotenboer entitled *Conflict and Hope in SA*.²⁸ Schrotenboer distinguishes between what he calls big Apartheid, the conception of separate cultural development, and petty Apartheid.²⁹ There is the program of a differential development and upliftment of the non-white races to maturity and eventual autonomy on the one hand and there are particular statutes of South African law that require passes for non-whites traversing white areas, restrict non-whites to certain underprivileged areas of white cities in which they work, and disallow interracial cohabitation and marriage. The latter policies are the occasion for much injustice and discrimination but the former program of differential development for peoples at vastly different stages of cultural evolution cannot simply be written off as callous oppression of blacks by whites.

Given discrimination at the level of petty Apartheid as well as the inconsistent way in which separate development has been practiced, it is improbable that the overall policy of homelands, of separate and autonomous but equal existence for black nations in southern Africa, can be continued. When we add to this the fact that modern societies have been disestablished so that their citizenry is no longer coextensive with the body of Christian believers, the factor of pluralism within any given state makes efforts within any nation to lend legal preference to Christian institutions a tenuous idea at best. However, it is not within my competence to say what is workable in SA and what is not. Moreover, in the light of the overarching geo-political struggle that is being waged between the Soviet Union and the West over the future of the African continent, it has become well-nigh impossible to say what must be tolerated for the time being in SA and what the limits of protest can be in this volatile situation. The further destabilization of the South African government appears to be the most serious threat yet to the fall of Africa into Communist totalitarianism.³⁰

At this point I wish only to raise the basic question of big Apartheid as a credible Christian philosophy of society and historical development. The fundamental ontological principle with which this philosophy of history and the state works is the idea of the differentiation of creation. On the basis of history and Scripture, I believe that separate development is a fundamentally Christian idea. By contrast, the ecclesiastical reading of Scripture and experience works with an implicit alternative ontology that is experientially inadequate and incompatible with the biblical witness. In brief I believe it to be false that the idea of the transcendent and spiritual unity of the body of Christ requires the institutional and structural idea of an integrated society. This is *non-sequitur* thinking of the fundamentalist variety, *non-sequitur* thinking that fails to appreciate properly both the complexities of moving from Scripture to social philosophy and the distinction between creation and redemption.

Please be patient not to misunderstand what I am saying. It is not so much in defense of Apartheid that I would stress a theology of creation and differentiation as in criticism of the ecclesiastical and Christocentric opposition to the Afrikaner perspective. It is with virtual unanimity that the ecclesiastical critiques of Apartheid confuse separation with alienation. For example, in a recent article of Desmond Tutu the widely held argument is advanced that Apartheid denies the doctrine of reconciliation.³¹ According to Tutu, Apartheid is the idea that man is created for separation and alienation, words he literally uses interchangeably. According to Tutu, in the creation accounts of the Bible there is only order and harmony. Moreover, only when the text first depicts the fall, a situation in which God's purposes have been thwarted, do we get "for the first time in the creation story separation and disunity." Thus for Tutu "separation, disunity, and division are all due to sin and are contrary to the divine purpose."³² Notice especially how Tutu uses the three terms "separation, disunity, and division" in an unspecified sense as synonymous. Moreover, capping off this exegesis, Tutu concludes that "The Old Testament knows of only one legitimate separation among persons and that is the separation between believers and pagans. Every other kind is sinful."³³

This folly confusing creation and redemption, structure and

direction, law and gospel, and subsequently arguing that the biblical doctrine of reconciliation leads to an integrationist theory of society is widespread and almost endemic in the ecclesiastical critiques of Apartheid. It has even made its way into the 1984 documents of the Interchurch Relations Committee of the CRC. In a report regarding the current position of the Reformed Church in SA on Apartheid, the authors respond to this church's 1961 public statements on the matter. Commenting on the RCSA's view that "God does not want uniformity," that "He calls peoples, nations, and tongues into being, each with its own identity and nature and determines the boundaries of their habitation," that "differentiation follows as a matter of course if the divine command to fill the earth is observed," and that thus, "this differentiation is not resolved in the Kingdom," the authors of the CRC response argue that "it is as true and more biblical to say that they (national differentiations) are essentially superseded in the kingdom, because people who were estranged from each other are united; they have a bond which, where necessary to defend the rights of fellow members, supersedes loyalties to earthly 'kingdoms.'" ³⁴ In addition, where the RCSA's document argues that the just claims of races to a fatherland of their own must be recognized, the authors of the CRC response chime in with a sarcastic aside that "living together is [thus] not to be [considered] the solution."³⁵ We should notice here that the authors think in self-evident, integrationist terms about society and the church and that they assume this theory of social organization directly on the basis of the biblical idea of reconciliation and the unity of the body of Christ.

On this central matter, the ecclesiastical critiques of the Afrikaner idea of Apartheid are simply wrong theologically and biblically, though one might sympathize with their felt moral indignation about injustice in SA.³⁶ First, they are not adequately self-conscious about the actual, operative "natural theology" which they take for granted in the form of an integrationist theory of society. Second, because their own theory of social realities remains implicit (the church is not competent to develop its own), it is justified by and identified with the biblical idea of reconciliation. But the idea of the unity of the body of Christ was never intended directly to yield an institutional theory.

In contrast to these ecclesiastical views and Christ-centered theologies of redemption, I believe it necessary to argue the biblical idea of creation and differentiation. This is necessary both to interpret properly redemption as restoring creation rather than superceding it and to provide the Christian social theorist with the indispensable task of developing data-relevant theories directed to the illumination of the structures of creation. Either Apartheid is right or there must be created an alternative social theory of concreteness. By the nature of the case an ecclesiastical critique cannot do the job.

On the basis of creation and the story concerning it in the Bible, I believe it important to maintain that the most inviolable and fundamental separation that there is is the one between God and creation. The creation was not once in God; nor is it at heart God. Creation is very simply different and separate from God. Moreover, following especially Abraham Kuyper's interpretation of Genesis, I believe that this basic separation sets a pattern. Says Kuyper about Genesis 1 and 2: "That man should ever be cognizant of the fundamental boundary-line between God and creation, God thought it fitting to reflect that boundary-line in the firm boundaries that he established among his creatures." Hence, Kuyper continues, "God ordered separations among all his creatures as an expression of the absolute separation that he maintains between creation and himself."³⁷

As many have noted, the idea of separation and differentiation, of dividing and consigning, is a prominent theme throughout the first chapters of Genesis as the world is being described.³⁸ The concept of separation and division, the making of things that are different essentially, each having an identity and self-action, controls much of the further presentation of material in the book of Genesis. But in particular it is that which gives the cultural mandate to man to develop (differentiate) the whole earth its concrete content and meaning.

We learn then from Scripture that no choice has to be made between unity and sameness in Christ and having distinct earthly identities. In other words, no appeal to the dynamic directive of redemption to be one in Christ can be made to determine the structures of earthly, institutional life. Both unity in Christ and differentiation in creation are very good, the former representing God's work in redemption, the latter, which data relevant

theory investigates, God's work in creation. Oneness in Christ is no alternative to natural separations and differences in the world and hence is no alternative to a social theory of separate cultural development.

Stated in general terms, God's act of creation is an act of separation, definition, and law-giving. The unity of things is a moral and religious principle, not an alternative definition of what being should be like. In fact the unity of things is dependent, according to Christian faith, on their distinctiveness in being. If the central ecclesiastical argument against Apartheid is that its idea of separation contradicts the biblical idea of reconciliation in Christ, then the ecclesiastical critics are simply theologically wrong, cashing in on a biblical and religious idea to legitimate a taken-for-granted "natural theology" of integrationism for which they are dependent on the homogenizing philosophy of modern, British political liberalism. Though there is a moral and emotive point to the outcry that Apartheid is a heresy, in substance this charge is a simplicism that is unbecoming of the best of Reformed social thought and practice.

Notes

1. *1984 Agenda for Synod*, p. 176.
2. From the statement adopted by the General Council on Racism in SA, section I. The WARC statement appears in full in an Appendix in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, ed. J. W. deGruchy and Charles Villavicencio. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 168ff.
3. *1984 Agenda*, Ibid.
4. *1984 Acts of Synod*, p. 604.
5. This wornout accusation casting the accuser in the untouchable position of representing, in contrast, "the positive mind" has been revived by the Rev. Clarence Boomsma in a recent article in the *Calvin Theological Journal* Vol. 19, Number 1, April, 1984. These designations were first developed by Dr. Henry Stob in the early fifties in *The Reformed Journal*, an intra-CRC periodical of decidedly left-liberal sentiments.
6. This volume was published by Eerdmans in 1983. In two articles on Apartheid and the Bible in the deGruchy book cited above, one is struck by how much the "biblical" case against the Afrikaner reading of the Bible is funded by "recent" or modern, historical-

critical scholarship. The names that appear prominently in these articles are von Rad, Westermann, and Dibelius. In another recent volume entitled *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*, the major theological sources of authority are Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bethge. Some writers make an occasional reference to a Dutch Reformed thinker to create the impression that alternatives to Afrikaner Calvinism are to be found within the Reformed community itself and that therefore the Afrikaner tradition isn't so Reformed after all.

In the latter volume one also confronts what seems to be a peculiarity of South African education. In these writings of the ecclesiastical critics of Apartheid, appeals to authority frequently take several forms. First, there seems to be a rather unquestioning appeal to what intellectual "research has proved." Second, there seems also to be the common assumption that what is most recent (or new) is simply by virtue of that fact also most reliable and most necessary to pay attention to. Finally, the fact that something has gained consensus seems in the South African literature often to contribute to the truth or proof of a writer's point of view, at least in the mind of the writer himself.

In any case, the cardinal difference between the Christian forces alligned along two opposing fronts is the matter of theology oriented to creation and the Bible's naive order of presentation of the acts of God, on the one hand, and Christ-, church-, and Exodus-oriented thought heavily dependent on biblical criticism, on the other.

7. Cf. again deGruchy, J. and Villa-Vicencio, C., *Apartheid is a Heresy*. In this volume Boesak seems to argue that the heresy is denying the visible unity of the body of Christ (pp. 34-35). In the same volume Desmond Tutu argues that actually it is the doctrine of reconciliation that Afrikaner Calvinism rejects (p. 40). Later in his own essay Tutu suggests that the defenders of Apartheid have turned race and skin color into a "soteriological, saving principle" (p. 45). We are not privileged with any explanation of what this might mean. In a subsequent essay Simon Maimela argues that Apartheid is an "anthropological heresy" (p. 50). In one of the most confused essays of all deGruchy tries several doctrines that Apartheid allegedly denies, in exasperation finally charging that Apartheid in effect harbors a false doctrine of God (pp. 81-3). Adding to the confusion and sensing the shallow arbitrariness of his own desperate charges, de Gruchy cuts loose with the outburst that Apartheid should be called heresy simply because it has caused suffering (p. 84).
8. *1984 Acts of Synod*, p. 178.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 601.

11. Cf., for example, the cover of the May 1984 issue of the *Reformed Journal*, which runs the heading in bold relief: APARTHEID IS A HERESY. In the same issue G.D. Cloete describes the decisions of WARC 1982 and of the Synod of Belhar of 1982 as having reasserted "that apartheid is a heresy." (p. 20). In an article for the Calvin College *Chimes* of April 26, 1985, Cloete also makes the same claim for the decision of CRC Synod of 1984: he says, "The world community has condemned it, the Christian communities—as well as the CRC—have declared it heresy" (p. 4). The few examples given here could be multiplied tenfold. The point is, however, clear that the declaration's reception interprets it as having declared Apartheid a heresy, the IRC's own nuanced distinction between Apartheid and its theological justification to the contrary notwithstanding.
12. deGruchy, p. xi.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 8. If heresy is what is " 'irreconcilable with the Gospel of Jesus Christ' " and "a denial of the Reformed tradition," then the fallacy is *petitio principii*, or question begging; if that is not Boesak's definition of heresy, then the fallacy is *quaternio terminorum*, or four terms.
14. *1984 Acts*, p. 178, footnote 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 179, footnote 3.
16. Oden, Thomas, *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. xii and 34.
17. Cf. in this connection the similar conclusion about the limits of heresy in Theodore Plantinga's *Contending for the Faith* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia Press, 1985), p. 32.
18. One need only think of the situation of the *Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands* which in 1981 declared a *status confessionis* simply with respect to the possession of nuclear armaments by the superpowers. Though the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* made a similar judgment in 1980, it stopped short of declaring its confession to be in jeopardy.
19. In 1977 at Dar es Salaam the Lutheran World Federation announced a *status confessionis* with regard to Apartheid.
20. The close association of the two situations coupled with a rather obvious lack of probing criticism of the similar Christocentric theologies that were and are operative in both cases can be noticed in the May 1984 issue of *The Reformed Journal*. The RJ's publisher, Wm.B.Eerdmans, has also taken an active interest in publishing side by side materials relating to the "church struggles" in both Germany during the war period and SA in the present. An attentive observer has remarked recently that this publisher has made a pitch to become the new Orbis Press of the CRC.

In SA itself Bonhoeffer's biographer, E. Bethge, has been called

- upon to explore the comparison between the German Church Struggle and the present conflicts in SA. A discussion of whether there ought to be a "Confessing Church" in SA appears in an appendix to Bethge's *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* (London: Collins, 1975).
21. For all the differences I have with the position of D.J. Smit as presented in his article "What does *status confessionis* mean?" (in *A Moment of Truth*, ed. by Cloete and Smit, Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1984, pp. 7-32), this is by far one of the best pieces of work in the presently available literature on Apartheid and the church in SA. In a characteristically Reformed way, which he unfortunately does not carry consistently to its conclusion, Smit acknowledges the limits that exist for the institutional church in connecting confession and politics. Cf. especially pp. 28-29 of his fine essay.
 22. Cf. Barth's famous essay on justification and justice ("*Rechtfertigung und Recht*") in *Community, State and Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), especially pp. 126-128.
 23. Cf. for example C. West, *Communism and the Theologians* (London: SCM Press, 1950), p. 304.
 24. Gill, Theodore A., "What Can America Learn from the German Church Struggle?" in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, ed. Franklin Littell and Hubert Locke, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 285.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
 27. Irving Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981).
 28. Paul Schrottenboer, *Conflict and Hope in SA* (Hamilton: Guardian Publishing Co., Ltd., 1968).
 29. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-36.
 30. Cf. the Appendix to this essay.
 31. D. Tutu, "Christianity and Apartheid," in *deGruchy*, op. cit., p. 40.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
 34. *1984 Acts of Synod*, p. 174.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
 36. Is it acceptable or enough, from a Christian, ethical point of view, to be only morally right though theologically wrong, even if the situation is one of crisis or emergency? I believe that this question poses the problem of the morality of thinking. Thinking too has a moral aspect. So it seems then that one has no warrant to be nihilistic with respect to what one thinks, even if one's cause is morally right or virtuous. It is incumbent upon us to be both morally virtuous and theologically right at one and the same time. Anything short of that

represents cynicism about thinking and its rightful place in human life.

37. Abraham Kuyper, *Ijzer en Leem* (Amsterdam, 1885), pp. 11-12.

38. Cf. Leo Strauss, "Interpretation of Genesis," lecture in "Works of the Mind" series, University of Chicago, January 25, 1957, p. 7.

Appendix

"Is the CRC Aiding Communism in Africa?"

In this appendix I wish to deal with two matters in particular. The first is more general and has to do with the liberal mind in politics, especially with respect to its perception of the Soviet Union. I wish to claim here that such a mind is present among an increasing number of institutional leaders of the CRC. The second matter with which I shall deal concerns more specifically the crisis in Africa in the light of the east-west conflict.

For the first matter I refer the reader to a recent book, autobiographical in nature, by the famous American commentator on Existentialism, William Barrett (*The Truants*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982). In his study of the New York intellectual circles in which he moved in the 30's and 40's, Barrett well describes the contours of the liberal, left-leaning mind that prevailed among the majority of members of the then dominant knowledge class in America.

Though at that time Barrett himself admits to having had deep commitments to Marxism, he and his circle of friends associated with *Partisan Review* were vocally anti-Stalinist. However, Barrett's fellow Marxist radicals were engaged in constant infighting with the dominant Liberal Mind, which, according to Barrett, had a hard time thinking of the Soviet Union as an active agent of evil under Stalin. Says Barrett: "The Liberal Mind seems unable to entertain the possibility that the regime itself may be intrinsically and energetically evil. Which may be why Liberals have turned their back on Solzhenitsyn. The facts he tells us, after all, are by this time well-known; but what he gives us as a writer is the human face of that evil as he himself had to live with it. And this the Liberal does not want to see" (p. 94).

Though this mind has gone through several phases (to be described briefly below), according to Barrett there is a continuity in the Liberal attitude toward the Soviet Union—"the disposition, to put it at its mildest, always to give the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt" (p. 95). According to the Liberal Mind, the Soviet Union is just one nation among others, with severe internal problems of its own that, to a great extent, explain its essentially defensive and paranoid international posture. The Liberal finds it impossible to take seriously the Soviet's own self-image, which is ideologically committed to world domination. Since when, anyway, do people act on belief?

In a first phase of Liberal infatuation with the Soviet experiment in a "worker's democracy," Liberals did not attend to the Soviet's international relationships but only to its internal life, the quality of freedom which they could only overestimate for just so long. Says Barrett, "Lillian Hellman's wistful remark, 'We were mistaken about the degree of democracy in the Soviet Union,' is really precious when one considers the distortion, cover-up, and conniving that went on in order to perpetuate that myth" of a Communist utopia (p. 96).

In a second phase, according to Barrett's description, it could no longer be denied that the Soviet regime had exercised a grim terror over its own citizens. There thus takes place an "inversion of logic" among Liberals. Says Barrett: "Though the internal regime . . . was indefensible, its motives and actions on the international scene were to be looked at benignly as those of a legitimate power. Somehow the evil of a regime stopped at its own borders, and its actions beyond that were all sweetness and light. Thus a certain mentality of appeasement set in" (p. 96).

In a third and final phase in which we now find ourselves Liberal opinion has fixed on the new note of nuclear armaments. In the confrontation of east and west, the Liberal finds accommodation the most tolerable attitude. For the Liberal the humane posture would be ultimately "to give in rather than bring about . . . awful destruction to the race and the planet." He has little appreciation for the fact that, as Barrett puts it, "ultimate confrontation may be a long way off, and may never come about if we push prudently but aggressively for the containment of the enemy now" (p. 97). Concludes Barrett: "In fact, not to pursue this latter course would hurl us all the more

quickly and dangerously toward ultimate confrontation. We need not capitulate before we have to. The course that Liberals are now pursuing seems nothing less than a policy of premature surrender" (p. 97).

The second matter I would like to take up in this appendix concerns specifically the crisis in Africa and the affect upon that crisis of the churches' doings. In this connection I refer the reader to *Crisis in Africa: Battleground for East and West*, by Arthur Gavshon, a well-known British correspondent. The volume is published by Pelican Books in its African Affairs series (1981). The author is by no means pro-SA, but this book is nonetheless a valuable source of information about Soviet intentions and actions on that continent over the last number of decades. According to Gavshon, there is already a planned slide for Africa into Soviet Marxist control. Says Gavshon: "From the zero baseline which was its staging-point in the mid-1950's, the Soviet safari through Africa has come a long way by the 1980's" (p. 103). A map shows Russian aid to 18 African countries. "By 1980," the reader is told, "there was a formidable Soviet presence in Africa, complete with air- and sea-lift capabilities." Quoting Lord Callaghan, former Prime Minister, Gavshon notes that the Soviets seek "a belt of friendly states across Africa from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean." Specifically, Gavshon continues, "Moscow already (is) strongly entrenched in Angola, on the Atlantic, in Mozambique on the Indian Ocean, and in Ethiopia edging on the Red Sea" (p. 94). With reference to SA Gavshon notes ominously in this context that "while the western nations were safe-guarding their big investment and trading stakes in SA and denouncing the system of *apartheid*, the Russians were keeping close contact with the country's resistance movements, especially the African National Congress, which had links with the outlawed SA Communist Party" (p. 97).

In the light of this situation, is it not likely that a strong, stable government in SA is, on the long view, the only hope an otherwise chaotic Africa has of escaping the already begun slide into Marxist control? Judging by the present, Cuba and other Soviet agent states seem willing to furnish troops to aid uprisings; the US and Western Europe will most surely not furnish troops to fight for democracy against them. All they need is total

destabilization, which SA alone really stands against. And that is no doubt why there is an accelerating effort by western media, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, and many governments to bring SA down, an effort in which the CRC, of all churches, joins through the manipulation of its Synod (1984). And the CRC has done this with all the naivete characteristic of the Liberal Mind and of an immigrant group desperately desiring participation in the cultured mainstream. How neatly the mainline churches have played into Soviet hands—and this poor church, with the moral indignation of a Cotton Mather, now joins the ugly chorus. However SA may be morally culpable for serious internal problems, when all is said and done SA remains one of the only stabilizing forces on the African continent. Moreover, officially at least (and we must learn to content ourselves with the at least!) SA admits the normativity of the Word of God. Marxists know the import of that, while we do not; and they act accordingly to destroy the Afrikaner mentality. By way of abetting the bringing down of SA the church cooperates in giving Africa to atheism. May God give us the courage to face the irony of that!

The 'Women-in-Office' Issue: How Crucial Is It?

Nelson D. Kloosterman

Introduction

Permit me to express my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers of this conference both for inviting my participation in the form of presenting a paper, and for asking me to speak on this subject. A more timely topic involving orthodoxy and orthopraxis could not be invented.

To fulfill my present assignment, I choose not to engage in a detailed analysis of the basic decision of the 1984 synod to permit women to be ordained as deacons. Nor do I choose to enter into a detailed analysis of the exegesis, popular or official, of those passages thought to be relevant by opponents and advocates of that decision. These choices do not imply that such analyses are unnecessary; as a matter of public record, many are appealing to the 1985 synod, convinced that the opposite is true.

I wish instead to indicate, by employing as little emotive rhetoric as possible, the dimensions of that disagreement already existing among us about women's ordination. Although I am an opponent of women's ordination, my present purpose is not primarily to persuade others of the correctness of that position, but rather to suggest how the dilemma we are now facing touches the church's faith and life. I would like to summarize several dogmas or convictions surrounding women's ordination, those concerning Scripture, equality and ecclesiastical office. And with regard to the practical side of the issue, I would like to examine the implications for ecclesiastical life of conscientious objection to women's ordination. Kindly bear in mind

that I must be more brief than I would like; therefore my analysis will necessarily lean on generalizations, by which I hope to avoid misrepresentation and overstatement.

Some Dogmas Involved in Women's Ordination

By loosely employing the term "dogmas" in reference to what some might call "opinions," I wish to suggest three things. First, these opinions are shared convictions among advocates or opponents; the truths argued are held firmly and enjoyed socially, not merely in private. Second, these opinions belong to a system of thought and conviction; the conception which imagines that women's ordination involves only women's ordination is gravely misinformed. In examining under a magnifying glass, as it were, the doctrinal and ethical side of this issue, we are looking at the enlarged segment of a fabric whose threads extend beyond our immediate vision, and are woven into yet other arguments and practices. Third, by using the term "dogmas" in a non-technical manner, I hope to convey that opinions postulated for and against women's ordination appeal to some canon of authority.

Scripture

The most basic and therefore governing dogma is the respective views of Scripture. It is important to note that both advocates and opponents of women's ordination employ a view of Scripture. Even when advocates state that the Scripture is silent on this issue, that statement embodies a view of Scripture, being itself the application of a certain hermeneutic.

Permit me to risk a very generalized description of the doctrine of Scripture held by advocates of women's ordination: Scripture is the Word of God inspired, inscripturated and interpreted within a cultural milieu. Because the "time" of the Bible and our "time" diverge, biblical interpretation requires that the contingencies of human culture be dusted off from the eternal principles divinely revealed. The charge is being laid at the doors of both advocates and opponents that the values and vocabulary of modern culture are being imported into the interpretation of

Bible passages. The choice seems to be which cultural system you want: patriarchal or egalitarian. If opponents say: but the Bible's own vocabulary is patriarchal, the advocates remind them that this is precisely part of the problem. One advocate, Paul Jewett, has argued that although the Old Testament assumes a patriarchal structure of society as an expression of the will of God, this structure is only *an* expression of divine will fitting under certain circumstances; "its obvious weakness is the occasion which woman's dependency affords the man to suppress her rights as a person."¹ If then these culture-encrusted texts are to be divinely authoritative for us today, we need to deculturize the Bible, find the core intention behind the bare text, locate the redemptive message lying within the human words. The process of deculturizing the Bible, that is, of separating the core message of redemption from the peripheral husk of the humanly enculturated expression of that message, is hard work, scientific work, expert work. Is it surprising that opponents of this view of Scripture insist that if its *goal* is to liberate one class (women), its *method* enslaves yet another (the non-expert Bible reader)?

A generalized description of the doctrine of Scripture held by the opponents of women's ordination might look something like this: Scripture is the inspired Word of God whose textual meaning transcends the bounds of culture and is therefore addressable to and receivable by all cultures of every time. The principles of exegesis are established by Scripture itself, and permit no separation between what the Bible meant then and what it means today. To be sure, studying the cultural and historical context of the Scripture's text is exciting, illuminating and rewarding for the Bible student. But honoring the text as text requires that we search for the literal sense of the text, that is, "the meaning intended by God, which is comprehensible to the reader who participates in the community of faith and which requires no critical operations on the text to determine."²

I mentioned earlier that both sides hold to a view of Scripture that undergirds their respective arguments. The most painful, the most polarizing, and therefore the most crucial feature of the women's ordination issue is not just disagreement over the exegesis of selected Bible passages dealing with women in the church, but the basic separation that has occurred over the

understanding of Scripture's self-testimony about its own authority. In some quarters, the seriousness of this separation is being underestimated. Is it really fair to say that the women's ordination issue is on a par with the issue of choirs in the worship service? Some indeed confuse any and all difference in interpretation with a difference in orthodoxy concerning Scripture's authority. And those who suggest that there is no room in the church for exegetical inquiry and discussion are mistaken. But this inquiry must proceed within the boundaries of the Reformed confessional hermeneutic that stands under the canonical text of Scripture.

What I am saying is not new; it has been repeated during the past fifteen years among us. No one, however, should now be startled by the fierce rejection of women's ordination among us; we have been arguing and trying to persuade each other for more than fifteen years concerning the dogma of Scripture's authority. These discussions are here summarized hastily, yet with sufficient clarity to insist that what lies behind the confrontation over women's ordination are diverging views of Scripture.

Equality

A second dogma underlying the women's ordination issue is that of equality. Again, let it be said that both advocates and opponents hold a version of equality that supports their respective positions.

To state the matter briefly, opponents of women's ordination maintain that equality and subordination in the church are compatible; advocates contend that they are not, because the subordination of women to men in the church implies an inferiority of personhood. Discussing the meaning of womanhood, Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty argue that "many Christians thus speak of a wife's being equal to her husband in personhood, but subordinate in function. However, this is just playing word games and is a contradiction in terms. Equality and subordination are contradictions."³ Calling Galatians 3:28 "The Magna Carta of Humanity," Paul Jewett applauds the apostle by saying that "whatever limitations one may perceive in Paul's view of the wife's subjection to her husband in all things, it cannot be doubted that in the matter of

male/female relationships as a whole he had remarkable insights for a former Jewish rabbi." Concluding that Paul made only a beginning in implementing his insights about man as male and female, Jewett summons us to action by saying that "it is high time that the church press on to the full implementation of the apostle's vision concerning the equality of the sexes in Christ."⁴ Because she views Galatians 3:28 as "the clearest statement of equality," Karen De Vos insists that equality in Christ cannot be reconciled with a denial of women's right to exercise leadership in the church. A church faithful to the Scripture has no choice but to consider the New Testament rules and prohibitions as culturally influenced and full equality as the eternal will of God.⁵

With respect to this use of Galatians 3:28, a more blatant case of theological kidnapping is difficult to imagine. The point of this text is not equality in Christ, but oneness in Christ; Paul did not argue that Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female were equal (*isos*), or the same (*homoios*), but one (*heis*) in Christ. To say that oneness entails equality is indeed to import modern concepts into the text. Oneness and subordinate relationships are not contradictory in the body of Christ; oneness, being part of one another, enables subordination to exist without questions of superiority or inferiority. Employing Galatians 3:28 to annul passages which speak of subordination in the church pits Scripture against Scripture.

These respective views of equality/subordination involve other Scriptural doctrines, one of which is the relationship between creation and redemption. It has been suggested that the divine activity of creation involved a process of differentiation that is decisive for our understanding of reality.⁶ Henry Vander Goot writes, "The experienced order and arrangement of different things in the world must not be viewed as essentially alien to being . . . The first principle is not, therefore, uniformity and oneness so that the multiformity of our experience must be viewed as secondary and derivative, destined eventually to become again the One it essentially is. In the Bible there is no such exaltation of homogeneity and sameness as there is in those dialecticist philosophies of identity that presently inspire democratizing trends in all areas of life. With the Bible we must stress . . . the plurality of distinctions among orders and things within the creation itself."⁷

Opponents of women's ordination contend that equality and subordination are compatible in both creation and redemption. While many allege a contradiction between Genesis 1 and 2, these opponents understand Genesis 1 to affirm that both males and females are God's image-bearers who together receive and pursue the cultural mandate. How male and female are to relate in their respective functions or roles is considered in Genesis 2. Here the order of creation (man is created first and woman is created for man) clearly indicates subordination—to which order of creation Paul appeals in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 as reason for prohibiting women the exercise of authority in the church. Redemptive unity in Christ and creational differentiation are not in tension. If North American fundamentalists allow redemption to pass creation by, so-called biblical feminists are permitting redemption to overturn creation. In both instances, redemption becomes creation-negation. But grace neither replaces nor revises nature; grace renews, redirects and redeems nature.

We might only mention three other Scriptural doctrines affected by one's conviction concerning equality/subordination: those of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Christ's mediatorial work. If equality of personhood excludes subordination, how then must we understand Paul's description in Philippians 2 of Christ Jesus "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, . . . and became obedient to death— . . ."? Because man (male and female) is created in the image of God, this parataxis of trinitarian equality with filial subordination may rightly be seen as paradigmatic for our understanding of human equality and subordination.

In this connection, reference must be made to what is, I believe, a gross misunderstanding of the women's ordination issue. Some are saying that this issue involves no essential doctrine of the Christian faith; unlike apartheid and Arianism, this confrontation is thought to involve no *status confessionis*. Without trying now to disentangle the discussions of essential/peripheral doctrines and adiaphora, I would suffice with the foregoing analysis of the equality dogma as proof that within this debate, several very significant doctrines of the Christian faith are being implicitly and explicitly reworked.

Office

I am led in the third place to examine the dogma of office underlying the respective positions. I shall not rehearse the exegetical intricacies nor pause to detail supposed misconceptions about office ascribed to opponents and advocates of women's ordination. The basic question is this: Does the possession of "gifts" entail the right to hold office? Does ability, even ecclesiastically recognized ability, entail authorization of office?

Opponents say, No; advocates, Yes. Opponents of women's ordination do not maintain that women *cannot* preach or govern, but that they *may* not. Nor should they argue that men are constitutionally, natively, inherently better able than women to preach and govern in the church. Neither would they insist that ability or lack thereof is irrelevant, but simply that these are not decisive. What is decisive is the location, the "seat" of authorization. One side says that authorization, or authority, rests with Christ and is exercised through office under the mandate of the Word. The other maintains that it rests with the person by virtue of his or her gifts. We must be clear about this. The impression may be given that advocates of women's ordination empty office of authority; they do not—they simply relocate it, albeit with subtlety, in the *person* of the office-bearer.

But the church is neither a democracy nor an aristocracy, neither oligarchy nor monarchy. It is a Christocracy. The authorization of office in the church derives not from the people, from the elite, from the few, nor from the individual, but from Jesus Christ Himself. With the gift *of* office (not the gifts *for* office; cf. Eph. 4:8, 11-13) we are dealing directly with the exercise of the lordship of the ascended, living Christ over His church. By means of the offices of the church, Christ's Word meets us with the diaconal style exhibited in His life and death, Christ's Word conscripts us with His charismatic power displayed in Pentecost's Gift, and Christ's Word energizes us within His redemptive-historical economy of salvation. Church office is Christocentric and Christocratic diakonia, charisma, oikonomia. Hereby Christ presents Himself to the church, and only in this light can we safely speak of officebearers as Christ's "re-present-atives." Such an understanding prevents us from

isolating office from the congregation, from interposing office between Christ and the congregation, and from democratizing office within the congregation. Office exists in, among and for the church, but it originates from Christ and administers the Word of Christ.

In the foregoing we have refrained from implicating either male chauvinism or the women's liberation movement as being formative for the respective positions on the women's ordination issue. An analysis of the effects of these cultural impulses is quite relevant to the issue, but in itself would fail to adequately identify its confessional and theological dimensions. In terms of the question before us, for both advocates and opponents, the women's ordination issue is part of a system of dogmas; it roots in the biblical structures of understanding God, how He has revealed Himself in Scripture, of understanding Man, Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit and His manner of leading into all truth, the church and office in the church, and salvation.

For the intensive study and investigation of the Scriptures resulting from confrontation over this issue, for the renewed examination of our confession and theology, and for increased awareness of God's gifts to the church in members and offices, we must be grateful. But the fact cannot be denied: we disagree deeply over matters of the faith. Because that disagreement is so theologically and confessionally deep, it is both so painful and so crucial.

Conscientious Objection in the Church

Let us turn now to the practical side of the issue, to examine the implications of this disagreement for the life of the church. Our focus here will be the practice of exercising conscientious objection in the church of Jesus Christ to women's ordination.

The 1984 synod declared that "pastors are not expected to participate in the ordination of women if it is against their consciences."⁸ Classis Eastern Canada has requested the 1985 synod to revise the implementation of the women's ordination decision by deleting this declaration, listing the following two grounds for its request:

1. This decision is contrary to the spirit of church unity. If a person disagrees with a decision of synod there are proper channels to change that decision.
2. The decision is contrary to Church Order Articles 13 and 24. This decision would remove ministers from the supervision of the elders in this particular respect.⁹

Classis Eastern Canada recognizes, I think, the dangerous opening granted by the 1984 synod. The danger lies in the ambiguity of the crucial phrase: "participate in the ordination of women." Does this mean simply that a minister may be excused from reading the Form for Ordination when a woman has been chosen and called to office in the church? Or may a minister also refuse, on the basis of his convictions, to serve on a consistory that includes women members, in order thereby also to avoid participating in their ordination? If so, may he not then also refuse to participate in other areas of church government where he encounters women's ordination (in such areas, for example, as classical appointments, church visiting, and delegation to classis meetings)? In addition, if a minister is granted *official* exemption from participating in women's ordination, does he not thereby also enjoy *personal* exemption from supporting in any form or manner any institution, program or regulations whose practice comports with women's ordination? There remains but one concluding inference: If a *minister* enjoys official and personal exemption from participating in women's ordination, may not every *member* of the church enjoy similar privileges?

The 1984 synod recognized, perhaps from the largest number of recorded negative votes in synodical history, that a "safety valve" was required in the situation it had created. But on the most narrow interpretation conceivable, that a minister is hereby excused from reading the Form for Ordination, this permission constitutes moral tokenism. Surely conscience instructs the performance of official duty, and its dimensions extend beyond reading the Form for Ordination. Conscientious convictions cut across the entire range of church polity and the ministerial office. If the most narrow interpretation is inadmissible, then I think it fair to suggest the broadest interpretation as most reasonable: all ministers, in fact, all church members are excused from officially and personally "participating in the or-

dination of women if it is against their consciences." The "safety valve" is really an "open spigot."

And this is what Classis Eastern Canada sees, I believe, in the present possibility for the conscientious objection to women's ordination.

Some may be inclined to argue that we are overstating the matter, that permitting conscientious objection for those opposed to women's ordination is an admirable exercise of Christian toleration within Christ's church. Moreover, the champions of such toleration appear to be more broadminded and sympathetic than those who would refuse for conscience sake to participate in women's ordination. But given the scope of conscientious objection just outlined, such toleration, broadmindedness and sympathy will necessarily be shortlived. How much stress will the bonds of denominational cooperation sustain before organizational and fiscal chaos forces the revocation of this edict of toleration?

But this toleration has yet another unsettling feature. More than the propaganda of any special-interest committee, more than the declaration of any conservative caucus, this permission of conscientious objection granted by the 1984 synod constitutes official polarization within the church. The result of this declaration will necessarily be that, for the welfare of both minister and consistory, before calls are extended or accepted, consistories and ministers must now formally clarify their convictions in this matter. A minister is *de jure* no longer eligible for call to every congregation, and a congregation is no longer free to call any minister. The ministerial eligibility policy of "being in good and regular standing in the Christian Reformed Church" now requires a rider, an exceptive clause. This officially induced polarization will not merely separate congregations within the federation, but it will effect division within consistories. Where differences of conviction exist, it is no longer women's ordination *per se* that stands at the center, but it is the minister's conscience that becomes the focus of disagreement. The "sleeper" in this official toleration consists in the inevitable result that a minister who *legitimately* refuses to participate in women's ordination becomes the "bad guy." But it is my contention that the *legitimization*, not the *exercise*, of conscientious objection in the church is inherently polarizing.

But if official toleration induces polarization and chaos, what would life be like if the overture were adopted by the 1985 synod, and this toleration were revoked? If the convictions of a minister's conscience contradict the consistory's proceeding with women's ordination, and if those convictions have already been adjudicated by previous synods, then the overture's suggestion that persons who disagree with synodical decision on this matter must make use of established channels to alter that decision is a clear exhibition of the impulse toward ecclesiastical collectivism. Should the overture be adopted, in a case of conflicting convictions about women's ordination the *consistory's* choice would appear to be: either acquiesce to the minister's convictions by not proceeding with the ordination of women, or exercise the special discipline of suspension and eventual deposition of a minister from office for insubordination. The *minister's* choice, on the other hand, would be: either violate the convictions of his conscience, or persuade the church that his convictions are correct. Given the impermissibility of violating his conscience, and the improbability of persuading the church to champion his convictions, the minister is left with but one choice: to face suspension and eventual deposition for insubordination.

Conclusion

In the face of what appears to be an insoluble dilemma, what are the church's options? The dimensions and arguments of my presentation have involved ordaining women to all offices; some may be inclined to argue that our problem isn't that serious, since presently we have permission to ordain women only as deacons. But that permission grants the exercise of authority in the church to women, despite the exceptive clause "provided that their work is distinguished from that of the elders." Appeals and requests coming to the 1985 synod for clarification of that clause will force us to say one of two things: either that women deacons may not share in any ruling tasks now performed by deacons along with elders and ministers, in which case the offices in the church do indeed differ from one another in dignity and honor; or that women may retain the exercise of authority in the church as deacons, whereupon the

"parity of office" argument can legitimately be employed to justify opening the offices of minister and elder to women as well. The net result appears to be that of either the CRC will have five offices differing in dignity and honor, or women will be permitted to serve in all four offices.

From my perspective what is required can be summarized as follows, in a definite order of priority:

1. The church must officially declare that the exercise of official authority in Christ's church is forbidden by Scripture to women.

2. In the interests of a self-consciously presbyterial church polity, the church's official permission both of the ordination of women deacons and of conscientious objection to that ordination must be revoked. I have argued earlier that to maintain the former is to introduce a fifth office or to open all the offices to women. To maintain the latter permission is to court organizational and fiscal chaos. On the congregational level, the seed of congregationalism has been officially planted; and congregational polity is something like being pregnant: neither can occur just "a little."

3. In the light of what appears to be a widespread divergence of opinion concerning the nature of diaconal service, signalled in part by the thoughtful reactions to the commission report on the relationship between world relief and world mission, the church could profit from a study of the Biblical warrant for the deacon's office, and the Scriptural ground for an auxiliary, assisting diaconate whereby women and men may employ their gifts in service to Christ's church without the exercise of ruling authority. The result of this study may be that we discover that the Presbyterians have been right all along in having only two offices, ruling elder and teaching elder. Or we might discover that the practice of our forefathers in the Netherlands of enlisting the help of deaconesses in an unofficial capacity is Biblically warranted.

The women-in-office issue: How crucial is it? Judging from disagreements among us over dogmas underlying the issue, over matters of doctrine, it is extremely crucial. From the practical side, judging from the impulses toward ecclesiastical collectivism and toward congregationalism, it is extremely crucial. May the Lord grant each of us and all of us together the love,

humility, courage and honesty to find in His Word the solution to our apparently insoluble dilemma.

Addenda

Invitation was extended by the editor of this volume to append remarks thought to be necessary in light of the response and discussion following the presentation of this paper. Wishing not to misuse this opportunity, we shall offer only three brief comments.

1. The criticism was voiced that, contrary to our generalized description of the "sides" (pp. 121-127), there exist people who favor women in some office(s) who nonetheless presumably hold to the view of Scripture ascribed to opponents of women in any office. One must not, it was argued, elevate a difference in *interpretation* of the Bible to a difference in *hermeneutic*, or a difference in views of the Bible. But, a difference in Biblical *interpretation* exists only where there are different explanations of the Bible. Now, the *only* Scriptural warrant expressly employed (but without any comment) by the 1984 synod in deciding to permit consistories to ordain qualified women to the office of deacon is Romans 16:1 (Phoebe the deaconess). But the majority report upon which the decision was based concludes its analysis of Romans 16:1 this way: "Though Phoebe, then, was probably not a *minister* or *deacon* in the official sense of these terms, she did serve the church at Cenchrea in a very significant way."¹⁰ This "biblical precedent," the only appeal to Scripture undergirding the 1984 decision, is never explained or argued in the decision, and is contradicted by the report presumed to underlie the decision! Without an alternative explanation of the Biblical data, where then is the "mere" difference of interpretation?

2. The 1985 synod revoked the "edict of toleration" which had granted to ministers with conscientious objections an exemption from participation in ordaining women deacons (cf. pp. 127-130 above). On another, related matter the 1985 synod declared that

as a community of believers, the church is called upon to give spiritual care and love to conscientious tax resisters and to

assure them that they are fully honored as Christians in spite of differences of opinion with fellow church members.¹¹

Still another, related synodical decree involved the propriety (rather, immorality) of withholding financial support from denominational causes whose policies violate a believer's conscience. Said the 1985 synod:

For an individual or a church to withhold certain quotas is not only contrary to Church Order Article 29 but also breaks faith with and erodes the unity and strength of the denomination . . .¹²

Permit two observations, enough to bring tears to the eyes: 1) no respondent at the conference thought it worthwhile to address the crisis of conscience articulated in the above address, except perhaps to dismiss it as a politicizing of the issue, morally equivalent to the position which rejoices at women deacons as the first step in opening all offices to women; 2) it is not apparent that Scriptural considerations informed synodical decisions pertaining to the exercise of conscience in the church (possible starting point: 1 Corinthians 10:28-29 and 2 Corinthians 9:7), which signals nothing less than persecution at the hands of the collectivist, hierarchical impulse of an organization bent on self-preservation. Ethnic conformity seems now to have been replaced with fiscal conformity; but both in the end constitute nothing more than forms of psycho-social control.

3. Finally, about that post-conference, non-published interview for which I quit enjoying my meal. The kind reportress wondered: a) what were my expectations in coming to the conference? and b) were they met? I replied with something to the effect that I had expected to see how deeply we are divided in the CRC, and yes, my expectations were met. Judging from the exasperation oozing from the fine point of her Bic pen, she must have meant, "What did you *hope for* in coming to this conference?"

To bear witness.

Notes

1. Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 129.
2. Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (New York, Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), p. 50.
3. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Texas: Word Books, 1974), p. 110.
4. Jewett, p. 147.
5. Karen De Vos, *A Woman's Worth and Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 55.
6. Henry Vander Goot, "Creation and Differentiation," in *Reformed Ecumenical Synod Theological Forum*, December 1979.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. *1984 Acts of Synod*, p. 638.
9. *1985 Agenda for Synod*, p. 540.
10. *1984 Acts of Synod*, pp. 320-21.
11. *1985 Acts of Synod*, p. 715.
12. *1985 Acts of Synod*, p. 811.

Liberating Secession or Lamentable Schism: Can a Reformed Church Be Both "Catholic" and "True"

John Bolt

The reality of polarization in the church is usually described in terms of a clash between "liberals" and "conservatives."¹ The purpose of this essay is to provide a perspective and categories for understanding the differences within the Christian Reformed community which are more productive than those emotion-laden and misleading labels. Specifically, I want to consider the categories "catholic" and "true" and the tension between them, as alternatives to those too much used and abused terms.

What Is Liberalism?

Now it is of course true that there is such a thing as "theological liberalism" and there is also a conservative, reactionary mind set. Because it had and still has articulate spokesmen,² the former (liberalism) is easier to define than the latter; what is often labelled as "conservatism" by its opponents is simply traditional Christian orthodoxy. Rooted in the Enlightenment, liberal Christianity begins with a basic affirmation of human autonomy and celebrates contemporary, modern culture. The Christian religion, it is argued, must adapt or accommodate to the best scientific, artistic, and social efforts of man. Liberalism is above all optimistically and this-worldly social and political; committed to the project of creating a better world. As one avowedly liberal religionist notes:

Liberal Religion makes men and women turn their faces to the world and gain inspiration in the affirmation of the reality of the world. The imperfections of this reality are not glossed over. Nevertheless, Liberal Religion scorns the cynic who preaches that a mere human cannot improve reality. It is a religion which, if pursued with moral passion, promises to create what is known in popular language as the Kingdom of God on earth.³

The liberal vision is rooted in a worldview which is monistic—reality is seen as one realm, one process in which God is the immanent Spirit at work in nature and history. History, understood as an evolutionary process is the important revelation of the divine Spirit. Kenneth Cauthen in his study of *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* sums it up this way.

The idea of a dynamic, unitary world in which Spirit is gradually permeating nature with meaning and value is fundamental to the modern understanding of reality. It is this basic grasp of things to which the liberals felt called to accommodate the historic Christian religion. This scheme provided a convenient way of interpreting the main elements of Christian belief. Since God is immanent both in men and in the world, experience is taken to be the locus of the self's awareness of God. The Bible is viewed as the story of man's developing religious consciousness. Christ is both the ideal man and the revelation of God, and he represents the goal toward which the creative process is tending and the means of directing the human race toward this end. Man is a finite spirit who has evolved from lower organic forms of natural life. Sin is the drag of man's natural substructure on his weak but advancing spirit. Salvation is the gradual triumph of spirit over nature made possible by the truth and power which flow from Christ. History is the story of the progressive triumph of the kingdom of God on earth. The church is the agency which promotes the advance of the kingdom. The validation of this whole scheme of thought is found in the actual progress which is being made in the lives of individuals and in society.⁴

It is thus possible to summarize the liberal vision in a few key words: autonomy, freedom, scientific, modern, historical, experiential, immanent, evolutionary, social gospel. This emphasis can be found in a liberal tradition going back to the Renaissance and includes such names as Erasmus, Kant,

Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, Herrmann, and Rauschenbusch.

Taken as a whole package this liberalism is antithetic to orthodox Christianity with its convictions about a transcendent God, an infallible authoritative revelation, and a fallen man who needs a Savior who is truly God and man. Christianity and liberalism, as J. Gresham Machen in his classic study of that name so eloquently argued, are irreconcilable.⁵ Liberalism is false; in it the gospel is no longer purely preached. If one takes the Belgic Confession seriously, that "it is the duty of all believers according to the Word of God to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the (true) Church" (Art. 28) then it becomes clear that true believers are obliged to separate from a church that is avowedly and self-consciously liberal as described above. As former editor of the *Outlook*, John Vander Ploeg, noted, "For liberals and conservatives to remain in tension under the same denominational roof . . . will eventually become intolerable."⁶ A "liberating secession" would then be justifiable.

The Roots of Differences in the CRC

But, and here is the key question, is that an accurate description of the realities of division in the CRC? Are we torn apart by orthodoxy embattled against theological liberalism? My own inclination is to answer that with a qualified "No." First of all, as far as the CRC is concerned, the categories "liberal" and "conservative" are descriptively inadequate, woefully so. The CRC is rooted in two distinct nineteenth century Dutch ecclesiastical movements, the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the Abraham Kuyper-led *Doleantie* of 1886. Furthermore the *Afscheiding* itself was divided into two major factions one stressing doctrinal orthodoxy and a strong Synod (DeCock and VanVelzen) and the other emphasizing piety and experience along with the autonomy of the local church (Van Raalte, Brummelkamp).⁷ The Kuyper-influenced Calvinists in the CRC were also divided into those who stressed the antithesis and separate Christian organizations and those who emphasized common grace and a more positive conciliatory, involved approach to

American society and culture. Henry Zwaanstra in his dissertation, *Reformed Thought and Experience in a New World: A Study of the CRC and its American Environment 1890-1918*⁸ identifies three main groupings in the CRC which he labels as "Confessional Reformed," "Separatist Calvinists" and "American Calvinists." James Bratt distinguishes three "mentalities" in the CRC, Confessionalists, antithetical Calvinists, and positive Calvinists. The first two he considers as "defensive and introverted" and the last as "outgoing and optimistic."⁹ (See appendix to this chapter.) In a series of articles in the *Reformed Journal* (1957) Henry Stob delineated three distinct minds in the church, the mind of safety, the militant mind, and the positive mind.¹⁰ Finally, Nicholas Wolterstorff, in an attempt to explain the role of the AACS in the CRC, suggested three distinct patterns of Christian life and conviction, namely pietism, doctrinalism, and Kuyperianism.¹¹

(Parenthetically, I believe that Zwaanstra and Bratt's three groups (see appendix) are the most useful for understanding the *historic* groupings in the CRC. To update this typology one could say that the *positive* (Kuyperian) Calvinists are represented by the *Reformed Journal*; the antithetical (Kuyperian) Calvinists by the early ARSS/AACS; and the Confessionalists/Doctrinalists by *Torch and Trumpet/Outlook* and MARS. To interpret what is happening in the CRC today I would say that the Antithetical Calvinists (the AACS—reformational movement) has split into two—one has moved into the ecumenical, positive Calvinist group—(*Vanguard* did give its subscription list to the *Reformed Journal*!)) and the other, retaining more of its antithetical character, has drawn closer to the Confessionalist group and given birth to *Christian Renewal*.)¹²

From this quick overview of the history of the CRC it becomes clear that the categories "liberal" and "conservative" are inadequate descriptions of the divisions that exist among us. They run more deeply and are more complex than that.

A second reason for my qualified "No" concerning the inroads of *theological* liberalism in the CRC is that I believe it necessary to distinguish rather carefully *theological* liberalism from *socio-political* liberalism.¹³ There are of course parallels (e.g. a rationalistic, evolutionary optimism about man and the perfectability of human society) and many of the Orthodox

Christian arguments against one appropriately apply to the other. But, they are two distinct universes of discourse and to confuse them is to get into a great deal of trouble. It is possible for theological liberals to be political conservatives and vice versa.¹⁴ For that reason, as Henry Vander Goot argues in his essay in this volume, one must avoid using theological and ecclesiastical language such as "heresy" with respect to political matters. Someone who in part or whole embraces or is at least sympathetic to the socio-political liberal passion for reform including equalitarianism, the income-redistribution policies of the welfare-state, internationalism, a victimization theory of poverty, and peace as the highest social value¹⁵ may be a misguided visionary or a naive fool but he is not a heretic.

My own perception (and I of course grant an element of subjectivity on this point) of the CRC is that while there may be some who flirt with aspects of *theological* liberalism, that is not the real danger. On the broad spectrum of church and theology the CRC is very conservative. However, I do believe that some, including influential leaders in the CRC, are attracted to *socio-political* liberalism and its explanations of reality. The point here is that socio-political liberalism cannot be refuted simply by orthodox *theology* but requires socio-political analysis. One example: Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*¹⁶ adopts a zero-sum, victimization theory of poverty. The third world is poor *because* we are its rich oppressors. That argument, which then appeals to a number of Scripture passages, can only be refuted effectively by hard cultural, historical, political and economic analysis of third world poverty. *Theological* answers alone will not do. One of the reasons for confusion in the CRC is that this distinction is blurred. Proponents of *equality* for women, for example, are shocked to find their *orthodoxy* attacked. "Conservatives" have a tendency to turn social, political and economic differences into matters of doctrinal orthodoxy. (Of course, when it suits them so do "progressives.")

A third reason (and this will be the most controversial!) for my qualified "no" to the question, is the CRC becoming dominated by theological liberalism, is that what is often *called* "liberalism" by its opponents, in fact appeals to an authentic note in Christian orthodoxy, namely its *catholicity*. In other

words, liberalism, in particular its socio-political aspects, has an attraction to orthodox Christians for *positive* reasons. The attraction cannot be accounted for simply in terms of satanic deception or evil intention.

Catholicity

What do I mean by the “catholicity” of Christianity. An ancient definition (Cyril of Jerusalem; circa AD 350) describes it well:

The Church, then, is called Catholic because it is spread through the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it never stops teaching in all its fulness every doctrine that man ought to be brought to know: and that regarding things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. It is called Catholic also because it brings into religious obedience every sort of men, ruler and ruled, learned and simple, and because it is a universal (literally “catholic”) treatment and cure for every kind of sin whether perpetrated by soul or body, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named, whether it expressed itself in deeds or words or in spiritual graces of every description.¹⁷

There are thus a number of aspects to this catholicity: 1) geographical—the church must be universal, world-wide, not limited to one nation; 2) doctrinal—it must proclaim the whole, full revelation of God; 3) social—it must include all classes and groups; 4) wholistic in salvation—all kinds of sins, individual and social are to be healed by the saving grace of God in Christ.

While the exact term “catholicity” is not found in Scripture, the idea it expresses is abundant.¹⁸ The Biblical vision of God’s sovereignty is cosmic and universal as is the rule of Christ. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” (Mt. 28:18-19). On Patmos, John sees “a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the Lamb . . .” (Rev. 7:9). The Reformed Confessions (Lord’s Day 21, Belgic Confession, Art. 27) also note this universal (“out of the whole human race”)

character of the church. Israel is elected as a nation to be a blessing to the nations. Under the theocratic rule of Yahweh spelled out in the Torah, every aspect of the Israelite's life was covered. The prophets testify concerning a universal redemption which the New Testament claims has arrived in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For that reason one of the early church's main struggles was against the Judaizers; those who tried to confine the catholic vision of the gospel within the narrow boundaries of Jewish ceremonial particularity. God so loved the "world" and redemption is cosmic in its scope; it is not realized until the coming New Heaven and the New Earth, where every pain and brokenness is healed. Furthermore, we should note the emphasis upon fulness (*pleroma*) in Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. Christ who rules over "all things" and has had them "put under his feet" has been made "head over all things for the church which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23). The same Christ in whom "the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:18, 2:9) seeks to reconcile to Himself "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20) and desires that His fulness dwell in the believer ("that you may be filled with all the fulness of God," [Eph. 3:9]). The Spirit gives the body gifts so that it might be equipped for ministry "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The Christian believer and the Christian community are therefore both called to *grow*, to extend, to reach out. The Biblical vision is thus catholic, universal; everything, not only in the believer but in the world, is to be sanctified, brought under the Lordship and rule of Jesus Christ.

Herman Bavinck summarizes the consequences of this catholic vision thus:

This catholicity of the church, as it is portrayed in the Scriptures and demonstrated in the life of the early church is gripping in its beauty. Whoever encloses himself in the narrow circle of a sect or conventicle, ignorant of this vision, will not experience its power and comfort in his life. Such a person short-changes the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He deprives himself of spiritual treasures which cannot be substituted by meditation or devotion and impoverishes his soul. But whoever gazes

abroad over the countless multitudes which are purchased by the blood of the Son out of all nations and countries and times; whoever experiences the powerful strengthening of faith and comfort in suffering that comes from knowing that one is part of the struggling church from time immemorial, such a one cannot be narrow minded and parochial in his vision.¹⁹

The *catholic* impulse is thus the disturbing element in the church which forces the church outward, beyond the narrowness of denominational, social or ethnic parochialism, to a concern for the world. Catholicity is the impulse behind all missions and evangelism and it is no accident that it was the mission movement that gave rise to the ecumenical concerns of the twentieth century. The needs of the world tend to dissolve confessional and denominational differences. There is thus a direct tie between a rediscovery of the apostolicity of the church (a church "sent out") and its catholicity. J.H. Bavinck summarizes it this way:

In the exercise of its apostolic calling the church recovers its catholicity: that is to say, as the church, in its living unity in Christ desires and feels obligated to extend itself to the whole world for no other reason than that its Lord draws the entire world within the framework of his saving deeds.²⁰

This catholic, reaching out impulse is of course directly opposed to all secession and separation. Secession withdraws from rather than reaches out. A catholic church is *extroverted*, a seceder group *introverted*. When we consider the history of the Dutch Reformed tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we must acknowledge more than a grain of truth in this analysis. Among the possible group formations in a church there is the real division between those who desire an *active* more inclusive reaching out in evangelism but also in socio-political activity and those who insist that the primary responsibility is to be true to the tradition once delivered. J.H. Bavinck describes this division masterfully.

The danger of such situations is that the Church can easily be divided between two groups. One group places the accent entirely upon the maintenance of the confession. Without denying the necessity of evangelism, it is still the case that the internal work of building up and developing one's own church is placed in the center. The first and foremost calling is seen to be

the preservation of the purity of the entrusted tradition. Careful watchmen, they are on guard to prevent any false, erroneous views from slipping in unawares. This group is generally opposed to ecumenical cooperation because it senses that such cooperation endangers the purity of its own biblical viewpoint.

Over against this another group which desires to accent the external responsibility, the apostolicity of the church. Cooperative ecumenism is seen as both desirable and necessary. When we stand with others in the front lines of the battle against unbelief we discover a common faith in spite of differences in denomination confession, church order and piety. This group is committed to thinking ecumenically. It knows that the church has a responsibility to maintain the purity of its confession and that there is a certain danger in going beyond one's own boundaries but it contends that such a risk is necessary for Christ's sake because of the urgency of the world's needs.²¹

It is this sense of urgency (which *may* be seen as eschatological) which drives the Christian catholic impulse not only in evangelism and ecumenism but also in the realms of politics, culture and education. The catholic impulse reaches out to the world, it does not withdraw from or ignore science (including such thorny areas as biology and geology) or philosophy (including such thinkers as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche). That is, of course, risky and brings with it the real threat of synthesis or accommodation. Real, honest-to-goodness liberalism is of course precisely such an accommodation but, and that is the point I want to make, the impulse which I have described as "catholic" is an authentically Christian one. Liberalism is the *perversion* of an authentic Christian impulse. When attacking liberalism great care must be taken not to deny or repudiate that valid impulse.

The Tension Between "Truth" and "Catholicity"

What I am suggesting is this: there is and will continue to be until the New Heaven and the New Earth a real tension between catholicity and truth. This tension is reflected in the Belgic Confession itself.

In its discussion of the church the Confession begins with a statement about the catholicity of the church: "We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit" (Art. 27). In the following article (28), it introduces the obligation that true believers have "to join and unite themselves with" this church and "to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church" since "this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation." The next article (29) introduces the categories of true and false: "We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of church."

It then adds the well-known identifying marks:

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself."

Notice the movement and inner logic of the Confession's argument. It begins by emphasizing catholicity and ends with an emphasis upon truth. Furthermore, these two are in some tension because while catholicity suggests continuity, universality, an all-embracing inclusiveness, truth is often discontinuous, particular because it requires choice and even separation. The Catechism retains this tension masterfully in my judgment by explicitly separating catholicity from any quantitative criteria ("And this holy church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though it sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal"—Art 27) and by rejecting all ecclesiastical perfectionism.

("But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him"—Art. 29.) In short, the Confession sets forth a vision of a Reformed Church that is both "catholic" and "true." The churches of the Reformation have not always kept this balance. A proper catholicity has often deteriorated into latitudinarian tolerance, confessional-doctrinal relativism, and an emphasis upon "truth" into schism. (Nineteenth-century Netherland is a good example of both!) There are two distinct major patterns of ecclesiology in Protestantism:²² a sectarian, separatist and schismatic one which emphasizes truth, doctrinal orthodoxy and discipline often at the expense of catholicity and unity,²³ and a broad, inclusive ecclesiology which often ends up sacrificing truth on the altar of a tolerant catholicity. Within protestantism, sectarian fundamentalism may be the most egregious example of the former and Anglicanism is a prime example of the latter. Anglicans are notoriously tolerant as Stephen Neill has noted: "If the Church of England had not developed a capacity, unmatched in any other Christian communion in the World, for tolerating the intolerable, it would have been brought to an end long ago."²⁴

Can we live with this tension between "catholicity" and "truth" in the CRC? I believe we *must*. The alternatives are simply unacceptable. We cannot sacrifice truth on the altar of tolerant catholicity and we may not in the name of "truth" retreat from catholicity into anabaptistic separatistic Christianity. Specifically we cannot give up the doctrine of common grace, critical biblical scholarship, evangelism, Christian social and political concern and activity, a renewed diaconal ministry, the multi-racial extension of the Reformed witness and biblical ecumenism. I am fully aware that each of these involves "risks" and opens up possibility for misuse and error yet the Reformed commitment is to quality Christian education for Christian vocation *in the world*. To give that up is to give up the Reformed faith.

(The point that I have just made, that we *must* learn to live with the tension between catholicity and truth, has been

misunderstood and needs further clarification.²⁵ The “tension” I have described is not an *ideal* but simply a *fact* of life. We should try to overcome it; we should work hard at removing the tension because it leads to polarization. The purpose of the Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis conference was precisely to further such resolution wherever and however possible. Until such is accomplished however (I don’t believe it will ever be perfectly realized until Christ’s return), we *must* live with the tension because we must live with each other. We cannot excommunicate either the “catholic” party and emphasis or the “true” from our midst. The church needs both; we need each other. That, very simply, is the point I am trying to make.)

A secession by “confessional doctrinalists” (“conservatives”?) for the sake of truth would be a disaster for the CRC *and* for the seceding group. If history teaches us anything the results would be predictable. The CRC would lose many members who rightfully emphasize truth and continuity with the tradition; the seceding group would endanger its catholicity. A Reformed Church must be both true (and holy) *and* catholic. To put it bluntly we need both our “liberals” and our “conservatives.” (It should be clear what I mean by this. I do not mean that real honest-to-goodness liberalism as I described it earlier in this essay should be tolerated. I simply mean that the “catholic” impulse I described, which is often called liberalism, is essential to the church’s integrity as church.)

However, this creative tension breaks down if one emphasis becomes so dominant that the other cannot be heard. That may be happening in the CRC today and helps to explain the shrillness of the confessionalist and antithetical (conservative) group. Many at least believe that the “conservative” view point does not receive equal time in the church. Let me in conclusion offer some observations about that.

1. Catholicity is not only a matter of reaching *out* in the present but also a matter of reaching *back* into the past. A catholic church does not only embrace and include the concerns and issues of the present but also the traditions, customs and practice of the past. Catholicity is apostolic—it sends the church *out* but it also is rooted in and normed by the apostolic witness and faith. Reaching out, extending, including, embracing may never be at the expense of fidelity to orthodox Christianity.

2. In his famous address on catholicity, delivered almost a hundred years ago (in 1888) Herman Bavinck distinguished between the catholicity of the Church and the catholicity of Christianity. That distinction is crucial in my judgment. The church institution is catholic when it *proclaims* the universal catholic gospel of kingdom to all nations, peoples, tribes and classes and *by means of its* proclamation impels men and women to fulfil their Christian vocation in the world. Christianity is not however restricted to the church and the church does not need to embrace and take upon itself all the valid Christian tasks and obligations that there are. To do so is beyond its mandate and its competence. Christian schools, Christian voluntary organizations, Christian labor unions, Christian political action groups are needed to fulfil the catholic mandate of the Christian community. This means that the institutional church's task needs to be restricted (also in the CRC!) *at the same time* that the vocation of the broader community is expanded. I am not sure that either the confessionalists (conservatives) or the positive, Americanized Calvinists (progressives) see that. The former erroneously tend to treat all the issues in the church and Reformed community as *doctrinal* issues and downplay or ignore the socio-political and cultural questions; the latter want to elevate social and political orthopraxis as *the* issues of Christian orthodoxy today. The battleground, in my judgment, is therefore not primarily in the seminaries but in the Christian colleges and Christian day schools. That is where the issues are really being settled.

Can a church be both Catholic *and* true? I think so. Our society in general is proof that battles to reverse the excesses of socio-political liberalism, while incredibly difficult, can be fought with some effectiveness. Trends in the church too can be reversed. In conclusion I offer an example which gives me hope, an example which strikes home to me because it comes from the place of my birth, Grootegast, Groningen, the Netherlands. The February 26, 1985 issue of *Trouw* carried a story about the *Vrijgemaakte Kerk* (Liberated Reformed Church) of Grootegast whose consistory deposed its minister the Rev. J. Hoorn because, note well, it disagreed with the Rev. Hoorn's interpretation of Art. 28 of the Belgic Confession. The Consistory felt that the Rev. Hoorn's conviction that outside the "ware

kerk" (true church, i.e. the *Vrijgemaakte Kerken*) there were no Christians was "in conflict with Scripture and the Reformed Confessions."²⁶ If a church *fellowship* as concerned about *truth* as the *Vrijgemaakte Kerken* is can be that catholic, surely a church which is so desperately trying to be *catholic* as the CRC is today can also be true.

Notes

1. See further my essay in this volume, "The Problem of Polarization in the Christian Reformed Community," especially pp. 14-21.
2. See *inter alia*, Frank G. Opton, *Liberal Religion: Principles and Practice* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1982); Lloyd J. Averill, *American Theology in the Liberal Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967); Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Liberal Protestantism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962); Kenneth Minogue, *The Liberal Mind* (New York, Vintage, 1968).
3. Opton, p. 13.
4. Cauthen, p. 212.
5. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 [1923]).
6. Cited by James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1984), p. 216.
7. See Bratt, pp. 7ff. and the literature he cites.
8. Published by J.H. Kok, Kampen, 1973; see especially pp. 68-131.
9. Bratt, p. 47.
10. Reprinted in Henry Stob, *Theological Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 183-217.
11. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The AACS in the CRC," *Reformed Journal* (December 1974), pp. 9-16.
12. This analysis is confirmed, I believe, by Bratt's conclusions in his overview of the CRC. See especially the last chapter.
13. James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1985 [1964]), is an excellent introduction to and exposé of socio-political liberalism.
14. As one avowed liberal has noted: The word liberal, in the present context, denotes liberation from Traditional Religious teaching; it has no political connotation. Liberal Religion is embraced by political conservatives as well as political liberals. For instance, Presi-

- dent William Howard Taft was not only a staunch Republican, but also prominent in the American Unitarian Association. The politically conservative Chamberlain family in England were members of the Unitarian Church. Religious Liberals sit on both sides of the aisle in the United States Congress. The Americans for Democratic Action are an outspoken liberal political group, but many Religious Liberals are opposed to them. The Liberal Party of New York has many members who pray on Traditional altars. In short, the word "liberal," in the present context, has no special political connotation even though, like many other citizens, Religious Liberals are generally interested in the political life of their nation" (Opton, p. 24).
15. See Burnham pp. 181-187.
 16. Published by Inter-Varsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1977.
 17. *Cathecesis*, XVIII, 23. Cited by John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977) p. 25.
 18. For what follows I am dependent on H. Bavinck, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1968 [1888]); J.H. Bavinck "Apostoliceit en Katholiceit," in *De Apostolische Kerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1954), pp. 218-242; and Hendrikus Berkhof, *De Katholiceit der Kerk* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1962).
 19. H. Bavinck, pp. 10-11 (my translation).
 20. J. H. Bavinck, p. 225 (my translation).
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232.
 22. For a discussion of these two streams see P.D.L. Avis, "'The True Church' in Reformation Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, XXX (1977), 319-345. A similar typology (church-sect) is suggested by Ernst Troeltsch in his *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 331ff.
 23. Herman Bavinck, it is worth noting, while a defender of the right and propriety of the *Afscheiding*, also points out the tendency toward sectarianism at the cost of a proper Catholicity in his masterful 1888 address, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk*. In a letter to his "liberal friend" Snouck Hurgronje, he writes: You have undoubtedly received my address. As you read it keep in mind that it is intended especially as medicine for the separatist and sectarian tendencies which are sometimes manifest in our church. There is so much narrow-mindedness (*enghartigheid* and *bekrompenheid*) among us and what is worst, is that this passes for piety" (cited by V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), p. 147.
 24. Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977), p. 254.

25. It was, I believe, missed by my respondent at the conference and may have been missed by Dr. Hulst. (See p. 159 of this volume.)
 26. My thanks for this little vignette to the Rev. Louis Tamminga.

Appendix*

***The Four Mentalities
of the Dutch-American Community***

	Seceders • Pietists "Infras"	Neo-Calvinists • Kuyperians "Supras"
	Reformed Church "West"	Positive Calvinists
Outgoing	The Leader	The Banner
Optimistic	Evert Blekkink Henry Geerlings	B. K. Kuiper Johannes Groen • Henry Beets
	Confessionalists	Antithetical Calvinists
Defensive	De Gereformeerde American	De Gids - De Calvinist
Introverted	Foppe Ten Hoor L. J. Hulst	Klaas Schoolland John Van Lonkhuyzen

*Diagram taken from James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 47.

*Reflections at the Conclusion of the
“Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis”
Conference*

John B. Hulst

I am thankful that I have had the opportunity to attend this conference. The papers and the responses have been of high quality, and the discussions have been most stimulating. All of us have benefitted from being here and, therefore, should express appreciation to Redeemer College for arranging and sponsoring this event.

This conference was called, in part, because of the article by Dr. John Bolt, titled “The Problem of Polarization in the Christian Reformed Church.”¹ Some time afterward, in a *Christian Renewal* editorial,² I publicly expressed appreciation for what Dr. Bolt had written. Now I am not only thankful that Dr. Bolt’s article has served as a catalyst for this conference, but I also sincerely hope that we may have many more meetings such as this one dealing with other timely subjects.

My assignment relative to this conference can best be described by referring to the letter of invitation:

What we have in mind is not so much a formal academic presentation as an overview of the situation as reflected in the conference; some reflections upon what transpired in the conference, difficulties and tensions as well as hopeful signs for the CRC community; where do we go from here?

Of course, I have given the conference much thought since accepting this invitation. A number of us at Dordt College spent some time discussing the main topic of the conference—especially in connection with Dr. John Van Dyk’s paper, titled “Heresy

and Toleration."³ I was also able to do some reading in connection with the subjects listed. Beyond this preliminary activity, however, most of what I am about to say has been developed since arriving at the conference itself.

While listening to the papers, the responses, and the discussions at this conference, I have been asking myself questions concerning the purpose of all of this. Why was this conference called? What is the real reason for our coming together? Have we been brought here simply to discuss issues? Are we concerned merely to come to clarity and unity among ourselves? No, I believe our purpose is or should be greater and more significant than that.

We confess that God has His people in this world. They have been redeemed through Jesus Christ. They are the covenant community, called to serve Him in His creation kingdom.

God has given us a special place among His people. He has given us positions of leadership within the covenant community. As leaders we are not to serve ourselves. Rather, we are to serve the needs of the covenant, Christian community for Christ's sake. We are to give the kind of leadership which will enable the Christian community to serve God—recognizing also that it can render such service only if it is united in Christ Jesus.

But how can this be done? How can we give the kind of leadership which will enable the Christian community to serve the Lord together?

In this connection I wish to read II Timothy 3:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the men of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This letter was written to Timothy by the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Timothy was, at this time, the young pastor of the church in Ephesus. This church was being troubled and divided by people who are described as “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” Paul urges Timothy, for the sake of this church, to stand and to give leadership in harmony with the Scriptures. Why? Because:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (II Tim. 3:16, 17).

This passage makes clear to Timothy and to us that we as leaders must function only according to and in harmony with the Word of the Lord, if we would lead in such a way that the Christian community will be enabled to serve God together. And it is this truth—that we must lead according to the Word of God—which is going to be the main thrust of my presentation to you this morning.

One of the issues we have considered at this conference is the issue of women in ecclesiastical office. How can we live and work together relative to this issue? Only by bowing before the Word of God. How can we give positive and united leadership in dealing with this issue? Only by giving leadership which is in harmony with the Word of God.

But I am not confident that we have done this. Instead, it

seems to me that we have politicized this issue. On the one hand there are those who warn: "The moment a woman walks into the (my) consistory room, I will stand up and walk out." On the other hand there are those who insist: "No matter what, women shall become elders and pastors, as well as deacons, in the CRC." Such statements—made by those on both sides of the issue—divide or polarize the people of God. Only when we reject such statements and the spirit they reflect, and return to the Word of God will we be able to give united leadership which will enhance the unity and the service of God's people.

I realize, of course, that to give united leadership in harmony with the Word, we must have a biblical view of the Bible and of the way in which the Bible is to be interpreted. In this regard I was pleased with what occurred here last evening in the discussion of the issue of women in church office.⁴ There were two speakers, each taking a different position on the issue. But, it was claimed at least, that both held to the same view of the nature and authority of the Bible and also of the way in which the Bible is to be interpreted. This, I believe, is why the two could speak with one another and also why further discussion could lead to greater agreement on this very difficult issue.

This, again, is essential. We cannot give united direction to the CRC community unless we bow together before the Scriptures, in the context of our basic agreement concerning the nature and authority of the Scriptures—and the way in which the Scriptures are to be interpreted.

In this connection, Henry Vander Goot has been very helpful by reminding us, in his book *Interpreting the Bible*,⁵ that the Bible

- must be taken in its literal sense, i.e., in the sense of the whole that has (been) developed into the conventional understanding of the Christian community of faith.
- must be read in a life context that has itself been formed and informed by the Bible.
- is a narrative presented in terms of a creation, fall, redemption, and consummation motif.
- is to be interpreted in such a manner that the text rather than the context is seen as sovereign.

- is not, first of all, a Word into which we inquire but to which we listen.
- is to be approached not from a critical framework which seeks to determine the Bible, but from a canonical framework which is determined by the Bible.

Bowing before the Word, in terms of such a united perspective upon the interpretation of the Word, is essential if we are to give united and effective leadership to God's people in today's world.

And now I want to make some observations on some of the issues raised at this conference.

Concerning the Issues Troubling the Church

As people who are in positions of leadership we are and must be concerned about issues which are troubling the Christian Reformed Church today. As we struggle with these issues, however, we must not be discouraged, thinking that the struggle is a sign of the degeneration of the church. To the contrary, the struggle over these issues in the church indicates that the church is still alive and healthy.

We must not forget, especially on occasions such as this, that we are yet members of the church militant—the church on earth engaged in the fight against sin and error. That fight will not end until Christ returns to bring His work of redemption to completion and to translate His people to the perfect glory of the church triumphant. Until that time we will be involved in the fight, the struggle with sin and error. But, again, this should not bring us to despair. Instead our struggles should be seen as an evidence of vitality, as proof of the antithesis between the church and the world, and as a confirmation of the church's holiness. If there was no concern among us to confront and deal with the issues before us, then there would be reason to worry that the Christian Reformed Church was about to die, having already given in to the forces of sin and error.

One last comment in this regard—not only will the church be made triumphant in the end, but it is victorious here and now. In his difficult labors on behalf of the gospel Paul could say, "Thanks be unto God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ" (II Cor. 2:14). In the midst of our struggles we may know that we already possess a share in the victory

which Christ promises to those who are faithful to Him and His Word.

Concerning Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

We have been speaking these days of orthodoxy and orthopraxis—in fact, the title of this conference is “Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in the Reformed Community Today.” In my judgment we must be very careful in talking about orthodoxy and orthopraxis, especially when we use these words for the title of a conference. I suppose we may and even must distinguish between the two; but we certainly must never divide orthodoxy and orthopraxis or place them in an antithetical relationship.

Those of us associated with the International Council for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education know that the Council has been tempted or pressured to err on this score. A choice must be made, it is said, between the violation of orthopraxis as seen in the apartheid policy of South Africa and the violation of orthodoxy as evidenced by the “*God Met Ons*” position on the Scriptures of the Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) Churches in the Netherlands.

Scripture, not surprisingly, gives insight into the proper relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. I am thinking, for instance, of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. Romans is a book which is divided into two parts. The parts are connected with the word “therefore.” The first part speaks of the Word which is to be heard; the second part makes clear that the Word is to be practiced. The point? If you hear the Word (orthodoxy), you must do the Word (orthopraxis). You have heard the Word, therefore, practice the Word of God.

This relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis must be made clear in the preaching of the church. It is time to re-emphasize the importance of preaching as essential to worship and central in worship. This preaching must be biblical and reformed; that is, it must prepare God’s people for living all of life before the face of God. To do this, however, preaching must make clear that having heard the Word, God’s people must do the Word.

Christian education must also be for hearing and doing the Word. There is a lack of emphasis upon the importance of

Christian education in the CRC today. This troubles me, because I am convinced that the well-being of the church requires that we have education on all levels which is not only Christian, but also Reformed. Only in this way can we avoid the secular spirits which threaten to divide us, and, at the same time, prepare God's people to live the truly God-glorifying life in this world. But if Christian education is to have this beneficial effect it must be a demonstration of the truth that the Word heard, known, and understood is a Word which is to be done, lived, and practiced. This is why, for example, at Dordt College we speak of "serviceable insight," i.e., insight which leads to and guides us in kingdom service.

Concerning Unity and Diversity

The Bible makes clear that the church is a unity, it is one. The church has one Head (Eph. 1:22); it is gripped by one Spirit (I Cor. 12:13); it is built upon one foundation (I Cor. 3:11); it has one faith and baptism (I Cor. 12:2). All this is to emphasize the unity of the church.

But this church comes to expression in many forms, in many places, and in many different circumstances. Therefore we speak also of the diversity of the church.

We must be careful, however, to avoid extremes in this regard. An extreme emphasis upon the unity of the church may divert attention from its essence as pillar and ground of the truth. Extreme emphasis upon the diversity of the church may cause divisions which obscure the church's unity.

But neither extreme will ever destroy the church. As R.B. Kuiper states in *The Glorious Body of Christ*:

Christ Jesus, the glorious and omnipotent Head of the church, at the right hand of God, guarantees its continuity. With the continuity of the church itself is bound the continuity of its unity. For unity is of the essence of the body of Christ.⁶

Therefore, we must work and strive on behalf of the church. But our striving must always be for unity—never for division. Furthermore, our striving must always be according to the Word of the Lord. Departure from the Word inevitably divides and points to the world—destroying the church's holiness.

Adherence to the Word assuredly unites and separates from the world—preserving the church's holiness.

But Where Do We Go from Here?

We must go forward. Indeed, we must be aware of and sensitive to our history. But we must not simply look back, dwelling unnecessarily upon things said and done which have divided us. Rather, we must go forward.

We must go forward in submission to the Word as interpreted in our Reformed confessions. If we do not submit to the Word, we will be divided. If we do not unitedly understand and adhere to the Reformed interpretation of the Word, we will be divided.

We must go forward in seeking to apply the principles of our faith to the contemporary age. It is not enough simply to conserve those principles. Nor is it enough simply to progress in the application of those principles. We must conserve the principles so that they may be applied. On the other hand, what we apply in our contemporary age must indeed be the principles of our Biblical, Reformed faith.

We must go forward together struggling with the issues and challenges which confront us. We must walk together; and, as we walk, we must talk. About what? I am not about to write an agenda for the CRC. But I am convinced that we must have more conferences such as this one. We must talk. We must all talk. There are some who are missing now. When we get together again, all segments of the church must be present or represented. And when we do get together, among other things, we must talk about topics already suggested at this conference:

- the Bible: its nature and authority, and especially how it is to be interpreted for today.
- what the Bible has to say concerning the revelation of God in Scripture and creation.
- the doctrinal issues described by Rev. Raymond Sikkema in his response to Dr. John Bolt.⁷
- the nature and various expressions of the kingdom.
- the instituted church; the relationship of various churches (denominations) to one another; the ecumenical issue.
- the church's relation to and mission in the world.

- the life (and lifestyle) of God's people in family, education, work, politics, and business.
- the nature of the enemy or enemies that threaten the church.

In Conclusion

This morning Dr. John Bolt spoke to us on the theme: "Liberating Secession or Lamentable Schism: Can a Reformed Church Be Both 'Catholic' and 'True'?" He acknowledged that there is tension, even conflict between that which is "catholic" (liberal) and that which is "true" (conservative). He concluded, however, that it is both possible and necessary to live with that tension.

I think I understand what Dr. Bolt was saying; but I do not think that I agree with him—not completely, at least. I am willing, for the sake of the discussion to accept his description of the two parties within the Christian Reformed Church; but I find it difficult to agree that we *can* or *may* live with the tension between the two.

First, I do not believe that we *can* live with the tension between the two parties. It is the inclination of the party which is "catholic" to neglect that which is "true"; and it is the inclination of the party which claims to be "true" to neglect that which is "catholic." Living with that tension is not going to resolve the polarization within the Christian Reformed Church. Instead, the polarization is going to increase.

Second, I do not believe that we *may* live with the tension between the two parties. The party which is "catholic" must hear and accept that which is "true"; and the party which claims to be "true" must be willing to consider that which is "catholic." Only then will there be unity among us. But this will happen only when both parties bow together before the Word of the Lord.

The question is not: What is the liberal or the conservative position? Rather, the question is: What do we understand to be the Word of the Lord concerning this or that matter?

I am convinced, therefore, that we must stop thinking in terms of "catholic" and "true," or of liberal and conservative. As I stated in the beginning of my presentation, we must think in terms of what the Word of God requires of us. I know that it is easy to say this, and that it is very difficult to do this. But, again,

it is only if and when we bow together before the Word of God that we will be able to give united leadership which will enhance the unity and service of God's people.

Does what I have said,—though it was prepared on the spur of the moment—reflect my personal commitment? Yes, it does. And I urge you to join with me, so that we will make and seek the fulfillment of this commitment together.

Notes

1. The article appeared in *Calvinist Contact*, October 19, 1984 and in *Christian Renewal*, October 22, 1984.
2. The issue of April 8, 1985.
3. Chapter 3 in this volume, pp. 59-75.
4. Editor's note: The paper given by Nelson D. Kloosterman is included as chapter 6: "'The Women-in-Office' Issue: How Crucial Is It?" The response given by Dr. George VanderVelde, as with the other responses given to the major papers, has not been included in this volume.
5. Published by Edwin Mellen Press, New York and Toronto, 1984.
6. Published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 49.
7. Editor's note: Rev. Sikkema responded to the paper, "Liberating Secession or Lamentable Schism: Can a Reformed Church Be Both 'Catholic' and 'True'?" chapter 7, pp. 135-150.