

INTERIM REPORT FROM SUBCOMMITTEE FOR RELATIONS WITH CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS

SEPTEMBER, 2014

A. THE REFORMED CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS (LIBERATED)

PREVIOUS TO SYNOD EDE 2014

As Subcommittee for Contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Liberated (RCN), we anticipated the work of Synod Ede 2014 with much interest. Synod Carman 2013 of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) had expressed deep concern about developments in the Netherlands, and had therefore addressed a letter of admonition to Synod Ede.¹ The letter expressed grave concern specifically in the areas of what was being taught and published at the Theological University of Kampen (TUK), the work of the Deputies Men/Women in the Church, and the direction of Deputies for Church Unity with the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC), churches which had placed themselves outside the federation of the RCN almost 50 years ago. The disquiet expressed in Synod Carman's letter in general focussed on the matter of Bible interpretation or hermeneutics. We first followed some developments which took place previous to Synod Ede.

On January 20, 2012, the TUK hosted a conference on homosexuality, which included speakers from the broader Reformed community in the Netherlands. The proceedings of this conference were published later on 2012 in a book entitled (English translation), *Open and Vulnerable: Christian Debate about Homosexuality*. This volume was number 11 in the "Bezinningsreeks," an official series published by the TUK. We were able to review this book early in 2014. We concluded that the speakers at this conference were obviously not all in agreement, but noted two striking general features from the published speeches. There is very little exegesis or asking what Scripture says and there is much talk of the current culture and the need for the church to accommodate as much as possible to homosexuals so they feel welcome in the church. It is of course a given that the church should welcome all who want to follow Christ, but the point here is that unfortunately biblical norms were not at the forefront, but human perceptions and feelings.

The Hamilton Hermeneutics Conference was held in January 2014, also previous to Synod Ede. At this conference a number of RCN academics expressed their views, and this only heightened our worries. How we read the Bible is crucial to its present normativity in relation to, for instance, the role of women in the church and to how we as Reformed Christians are to respond to homosexual relationships in today's increasingly secular culture. The conference has been sufficiently covered in *Clarion* and *Christian Renewal*. There is general agreement among the North American churches that there is an obvious trend in the RCN to accommodate Biblical interpretation to modern geological, biological, archaeological and sociological theories by means of a hermeneutic which deviates from the traditional Reformed method of handling the Word of truth.

We wondered what the Deputies Men and Women in the Church would recommend to Synod Ede for the RCN churches. Their report² was a huge disappointment to us. It urged the RCN to declare that in the light of its new direction of Bible interpretation there is no Biblical reason why women cannot serve in all church offices. The introduction of this report put forward the issue as the deputies saw it: *How do we read the Bible? At the same time, this theological problem is partly engendered by social and cultural*

¹ Acts of General Synod 2013 of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Article 165, page 212.

² RCN Reports available in English at <http://www.gkv.nl/kerkplein/english-materials/>

*shifts, and by changes in the way church members think and live.*³ The report ascertained that church members in the RCN experience a growing tension between the opportunities available to women in society and the restrictions on the roles of women in church life. However, the Bible gives obvious directives about the relations between men and women in Genesis and the apostle Paul states in certain passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 that women are not to speak or have authority in church. How are we to read those passages? The report asserted that due to the current socio-cultural developments surrounding the role of women, there is “real uncertainty” as to how the Pauline statements about the role of women in the church must be read.⁴ The report then reviewed those passages and re-interpreted them in such a way that instead of giving normative prescriptions concerning the role of women for all times, they were read as a requirement for the church to adjust women’s roles according to the prevailing culture. In other words, those passages about women not speaking or having authority over men in church were not normative for today. Instead, the purpose of those apostolic statements would be to ensure that the church does not create an unnecessary hindrance to people of the prevailing culture to follow Christ, thus impeding the progress of God’s Kingdom.⁵

This report, we believe, has put aside the Bible’s plain, normative speaking about the roles of men and women in the church in favour of a contrived and complex new hermeneutical technique which emphasized socio-cultural factors which result in interpreting what the Bible says in such a way that it says the opposite of what it simply and naturally says. There was one dissenting deputy, brother D.A.C Slump, whose criticisms of the report were appended to it. We found ourselves in full agreement with his arguments. He pointed out that too much weight was given to the cultural context while insufficient weight was given to the creation ordinance concerning the place of men and women. More importantly, this deputy’s also concluded that “the report does insufficient justice to the significance that the Word of God, including that spoken by the mouth of Paul, has for today.”⁶ This matched our most serious criticism, namely how the report treated the Word of God. We do not believe that humans are the ultimate authors of the Bible passages discussed, but those words were inspired by the Holy Spirit who used people in their circumstances to write down what He wanted them to say for the “regulation, foundation and confirmation” of the faith for the church of all times and places (Articles 3, 5 and 7 of the Belgic Confession). The report, however, seems to have lost its hold on this truth in its complex process of interpretation in cultural contexts. Even without being adopted by Synod, it was quite disconcerting that deputies (who include TUK academics) would proffer such an approach to the clear directives of the Bible.

Another report published by deputies before Synod Ede concerned the Revised Church Order of the RCN. Synod Amersfoort 2005 already appointed a committee with the mandate to revise the Church Order. After a number of proposals were reviewed by subsequent synods, Synod Ede 2014 is expected to finalize it. The proposal to Synod Ede was a major overhaul of the Church Order of Dort which has functioned in the Reformed churches for hundreds of years. The overall impression of the Subcommittee was positive. This revision of the Church Order continued to reflect the essential principles of the old Church Order of Dort. The basic principles of the headship of Christ and the authority of the local consistory under Christ appear to be maintained, and hence also the autonomy of the local church. This Church Order however, seemed to include more centralizing rules on the one hand

³ Report of Deputies Men and Women in the Church for Synod Ede 2014, page 5

⁴ Report, page 8

⁵ Report, page 23

⁶ Report, page 41

with Synods facilitating changes, while on the other hand more flexibility with regulations which seemed to give room for local experiments. Though much has changed, the proposed Church Order continued to reflect the centuries-old principles of Reformed church polity. Synod 2014 could not fully finalize everything connected with this new church order, as the 'Regulations' were not yet added to it. It remains to be seen how the new church order will be practically applied in these 'Regulations.'

We were taken aback by how the concerns expressed in our subcommittee report to Synod Carman 2013 and Synod Carman's decisions and letter of admonition concerning the RCN were typified in the Report of Deputies Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK) to Synod Ede 2014. The report stated that "many of these objections have been based on personal observations within our churches, and not on the documents on the basis of which the churches have agreed to be mutually accountable."⁷ We had taken pains to base our extensive report to Synod Carman 2013 only on the official documents of the RCN Synods and the official publications of the TUK. In fact, when directly asked by the chairman of Synod Carman whether the facts of the subcommittee's report were accurate, the fraternal delegates of the RCN indicated that they were, though they disagreed with the interaction with those facts.⁸ We can only conclude that the decisions and admonition of our churches were lumped in with those of other churches. Unfortunately this would imply that the CanRC concerns were not taken as seriously by the BBK as we had hoped.

Finally, Dr. K. van Bekkum responded in a letter to the criticism of the CanRC and others of certain assertions made in his 2010 doctoral thesis at the TUK entitled "From Conquest to Coexistence." He stated that he had learned from the criticism, but he still felt misunderstood in that there has been little attention for the academic context of his thesis. He also holds that he has been misrepresented, for instance in his statements about the sun standing still in Joshua 10, and too harshly criticized as a result. We were disappointed that as far as we can understand he still maintains his thesis statements which still sound very much like Scripture critical statements.

AT SYNOD EDE 2014⁹

Synod Ede opened on January 31st, 2014. Unlike our synods where delegates from sister churches are invited to attend and speak and also take part in discussions throughout the time synod convenes, the RCN organize a "Foreign Delegates Week" at which delegates of foreign sister churches and observers from other churches are invited to a few select sessions and invited to address Synod with words of greeting. Brother Gerard Nordeman attended the "Foreign Delegates Week" organized March 22-29, 2014. He has reported on his impressions in a previous issue of Clarion. In his address to Synod Ede He introduced the CanRC and expressed the concerns of the CanRC regarding the changes in the method of interpretation of the Bible in the RCN. He was not the only foreign delegate who expressed such concerns. Brother Nordeman seriously warned Synod Ede that if the report of the Deputies Men and Women in the Church was not rejected, the CanRC would not see their way to continue the relationship with the RCN.

As Subcommittee we were also invited to attend Synod Ede on May 16th and 17th. On the 16th the letter of admonitions sent by various foreign churches would be discussed, and delegates from those churches were told on that day that they had only 10 minutes to elaborate on their concerns. On the following day the plan was for Synod to discuss the Report of Deputies Men and Women in the Church, but there

⁷ Report of Deputies Relations with Churches Abroad, page 5.

⁸ Acts of General Synod Carman 2013 of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Article 148, 3.15, page 180.

⁹ Basic decisions of Synod Ede available at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/besluiten-gs-2014/>

would be no opportunity for delegates to speak on it. Sadly, we felt that with these measures Synod Ede effectively reduced us simply to observer status.

On May 16th, Rev. J. De Gelder expressed gratitude for the opportunity given to elaborate on the concerns of the CanRC. He emphasized that our apprehensions do not simply revolve around the matter of women in office, but involve the matter of how the Bible is being interpreted. There is no denying that the RCN are in the process of adopting a method of interpreting which is different than the method used over the past centuries, and our concern is that the meaning of Scripture is being accommodated to conform to the pressures of an ever-more secular and post-modern society. Dr. C. Van Dam emphasized that the RCN have been the bearers of a rich, Reformed inheritance of Bible interpretation and it would be unfortunate if that legacy would now be polluted by changeable unbiblical theories.

Synod declared the letters of admonition from various churches admissible and lumped them together in its response. Synod stated that the concerns of the sister churches are evidence of our involvement with the RCN in Christ, and that they wished to remain accountable to the binding to Scripture and confessions. However, they also remarked that it is without doubt that the RCN are no longer the same churches as they were 40 years ago. It was also indicated that the differences of opinion among authors or in reports should not be enlarged to become objections to the RCN. The churches are only accountable for decisions which are taken at assemblies. Hence the request in our letter of admonition to indicate that the views expressed by Dr. S. Paas in his dissertation are not in harmony with the Word of God were ignored. As well, our concern about Dr. K. van Bakkum's method of critical Bible interpretation in his TUK dissertation was not touched on at all. In summary, the actual content of the Synod Carman 2013 letter was not specifically referred to. We can only conclude that Synod Ede's response did not show much real consideration for the deep disquiet expressed by our churches.

We note with dismay that the concern expressed in Synod Carman's letter of admonition in regard to the matter of women in office in the RCN has not had much real impact on those developments. On May 17th, the Report of Deputies Men and Women in the Church was tabled. We observed that the approach of the report was deemed too radically different and too complex by many of the synod delegates. In spite of that sentiment, however, it was also expressed by some delegates to Synod Ede that it is culturally inevitable that women will in future also hold office in the churches and what is still needed is an interpretation which is acceptable to the general membership of the RCN.

The discussion concerning the role of women in the church was continued on May 20th and finally concluded on June 5th. Synod decided that it could not accept the argumentation of the Report of Deputies Men and Women in the Church. However, though the report was not accepted, the matter of whether women may serve in all church offices remained an open question. Synod saw two lines in Scripture: the line of equality between men and women and the line of differing tasks given to men and women. Those two lines need to be resolved. Synod decided to appoint Deputies Men and Women to do this by investigating (our translation):

1. how the offices can be structured so that in them women can be active for God's kingdom; thereby taking into account those two lines in Scripture;
2. what the consequences are of such a structure, relative to the current forms and the church order; and
3. what the opinions are within sister churches concerning the implementation of the offices of minister, elder, and deacon; this with a view toward maintaining the catholicity of the church.

The appointed deputies were also instructed to inform the sister churches, both nationally and internationally, concerning the third decision and to request their advice.

Synod Ede also decided to appoint another committee Men and Women in the Church to investigate working toward integration of Biblical education, the confessional norms, and the practice of the Reformed churches in connection with the roles and functions of women and men in their mutual relations, by (our translation):

1. describing actively how and on what ground in Reformed churches men and women in various situations use their talents in the congregation;
2. noting in connection to this strong points, best practices, but also difficulties and points of controversy, giving a first assessment of these matters, and communicate this to the churches;
3. entering and remaining in conversation about these observations and considerations with especially the employees of the Theological University and the Praktijkcentrum;
4. stimulating and supporting the conversation about the calling and right of women also to use their talents in the churches, with a view toward a practice that reflects the manifold message of the Scripture, with special attention to:
 - a. Scriptural and obedient reading of the Bible;
 - b. the influence of society on the thought and actions of Christians;
 - c. the special and complementary differences between man and woman.
5. and in all the aforementioned activity, specifically asking women about their various experiences and convictions.

This second committee was also given the task to investigate whether there are developments in the churches in this respect that converge sufficiently, so that it is responsible to make general decisions and to submit proposals to the next general Synod. As well they are to communicate relevant proposals to sister churches, both national and international, though the Contact Committee. Unfortunately, all this appears to the Subcommittee as having decided on the conclusion before having come up with the Biblical basis for that conclusion.

That this is the case is confirmed by the decision of Synod Ede concerning unity discussions with the NRC. Synod Carman's letter to Synod Ede noted that these discussions have become warmer over time mainly due to the RCN having moved in the direction of the NRC in regards to the method of Bible interpretation and to the looser subscription to the confessions accepted in those churches. However, Synod Ede proceeded further with the relationship with the NRC. Two of the decisions of Synod Ede concerning the contact with the NRC are as follows (our translation):

to declare that due to the agreement in discussions concerning hermeneutics the hindrance which existed because of the opening of the offices to women in the NRC has been removed;

to continue the contact with the NRC and to proceed from talks to discussions with an eye to church unity.

What these decisions clearly showed us is that the hermeneutic utilized by the NRC to open all church offices to women has in principle been already accepted as valid by Synod Ede. Thus, we could say, the matter of women in office has already entered the RCN via the "Trojan horse" of decisions concerning unity talks with the NRC.

We remain concerned that the misgivings expressed in the Synod Carman letter of admonition about the dissertations of Dr. Paas and Dr. van Bekkum have not brought any change or action. Instead Dr. Paas has been appointed by Synod Ede as professor of Missiology at the TUK, and Dr. van Bekkum remains assistant professor of Old Testament there without either having retracted any of their Scripture critical statements.

POST SYNOD REFLECTION

Synod Carman 2013 stated that we present our concerns to Synod Ede of the RCN 2014 “in humility and with the heartfelt desire that you would take heed to the matters we bring before you. Our rules for ecclesiastical fellowship state that ‘the churches shall assist each other in the maintenance, defence and promotion of the Reformed faith in doctrine, church polity, discipline and liturgy,’ and shall be ‘watchful for deviations.’ It is in this context of ecclesiastical accountability that we direct our exhortations to you.” At this point we have to conclude with sadness that thus far our exhortations have not been accepted in the spirit in which they were directed. We can only say at this point that this does not bode well for the CanRC relationship with the RCN.

B. THE REFORMED CHURCHES (RESTORED) (now RCNr)

The subcommittee had opportunity to meet with 4 Deputies BBK of the RCNr on May 15, 2014 in Hasselt, the Netherlands. A number of matters of concern by the respective churches had our attention at that meeting. We were able to speak about these somewhat difficult issues in a brotherly way. We questioned the brothers if the RCNr still considers the CanRC a church on the wrong path and one which Reformed believers need to be concerned about. In response the RCNr brothers expressed disappointment that Synod Carman 2013 did not respond to their letter to that body. At the same time they were happy to note that there is more understanding now for the RCNr and its struggles leading to the liberation from the RCN. However, if the CanRC maintains its declaration that the RCNr is not far from being schismatic, they would find it difficult to see any use having to defend and explain the grounds for their liberation in 2003. We were able to explain that the opinion of the Synod is mainly based on the fact that RCNr has a sister-church relationship with the Liberated Reformed Church in Abbotsford. This matter received considerable attention but we could not come to a common understanding. As long as this matter in particular remains, there is little hope of the CanRC coming closer to the RCNr.

Since our last meeting with the brothers of the RCNr several developments have taken place. Rev. E. Heres and his congregation at Dalfsen (approx. 90 members) have joined the bond of the RCNr churches. There is also a program of Training for the Ministry. Rev. C. Koster is now Minister of the Word. Br. M. Dijkstra has just graduated and has sustained his preparatory examinations. Br. M. Sneep is continuing his theological studies. Currently the federation consists of 12 congregations with 4 ministers, 1 candidate, and 1 student. Efforts are continuing to reach out to others. In different places there are talks with the RCNvv. Moreover, informative evenings are being organized for the concerned in the RCN.

C. THE REFORMED CHURCHES NETHERLANDS (now RCNvv)

The subcommittee also had an opportunity to meet with 4 Deputies BBK of the RCNvv on May 14, 2014 in Ede. To help us become better acquainted with this federation these deputies presented us with a *Presentation* in which they provide detailed information about the Biblical and Confessional foundation, composition and history of their churches. It is available on the federation’s website (<http://www.gereformeerdekerkennederland.nl>) in Dutch. From it we quote: “The **Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland** (GKN), without the insert 'in' and without further postal or informal addition, is the name of the denomination as decided on November 26, 2009. A federation of local Reformed churches who, from the Protestant Reformation, through the secession of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1834, the Doleantie in 1886, the Union in 1892 and the Liberation in 1944, 2003 and subsequent years want to live in 2013, only according to the Holy Scripture”. Because of its small size and resulting limitations in the church order, the federation was initially called a provisional federation (voorlopig verband). Due to

an incorrect association of the word 'provisional' with 'temporary' this term is obsolete and is no longer used. (In order to be able to differentiate the various reformed churches in the Netherlands we will continue to use the addition vv.)

Present on behalf of the RCNvv were Rev. E. Hoogendoorn, Rev. L. Heres, br. J. de Bruine, and br. J. van Wijk. Rev. Heres had recently been ordained as the third minister in this small federation that currently consists of nine congregations. One congregation (Kampen, Rev. Hogendoorn) had separated itself from the RCN(lib), and 2 congregations came out of the RCNr. The others were local developments of individual concerned members from within the RCN(lib). In general, the meeting was a positive experience. The brothers of the RCNvv freely answered the questions presented to them and acknowledged that in the past not all things were necessarily done in a manner which is church politically correct. A new church publication, *De Weerklank*, had recently gotten off the ground. They expressed a commitment to work together with the RCNr - should they be willing – in order to seek unity with them. At this time there still appear to be some obstacles that not infrequently are due to human nature. The brothers informed us that there have also been discussions with deputies of Reformed churches in Australia (FRCA) and South Africa (FRCSA). The RCNvv have asked the VGKSA to continue this contact. The RCNvv also requested the CanRC to be positive about maintaining a form of contact.

Rev. J. DeGelder
Rev. J. Moesker
Gerard Nordeman
Dr. C. VanDam