

Appendix 2: Decision 'objections churches abroad'

Materials:

1. Letter of admonition from the Synod of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia in Armadale, 2012 (April 22, 2013) with 19 appendices.
2. Letter from the Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Carman, 2013 (May 21, 2013).
3. Letter from the Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States (June 5, 2013).
4. Letter from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (December 6, 2013).
5. Letter from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ireland (December 12, 2013).
6. Letter from the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad of the United Reformed Churches in North America (January 1, 2014).
7. Letter from the Deputies of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia for Relations with Sister Churches (March 3, 2014) (supplement to Material #1).

The objections voiced in the letters may be arranged and summarized as follows:

1. *Objections to TUK publications:*

The publications by K. van Bekkum (historicity of the Scripture), S. Paas (idem), J.J.T Doedens (exegesis Genesis 1/2) and A.L.Th. de Bruijne (hermeneutics) are cited. Also cited are statements made by G. Harinck (Scripture and homosexuality).

It is noted that successive general synods of the GKv did not deal with these objections. The GS Zwolle-Zuid (2008) referred to the fact that the Board of Supervision dealt with these objections. Moreover, with respect to A.L.Th. de Bruijne, reference was also made to the consistory of Rotterdam-C. An appeal on the grounds of art. 31 of the Church Order was also judged to be unfounded. According to the writers of the letter, a historical-critical approach to the Bible will lead to an acceptance of Scripture-critical scholarship within the TUK and will, in the long term, result in a decreased appreciation of the authority and accuracy of the Word of God among newly trained ministers.

Furthermore, the writers of the letter are concerned about the manner in which the GKv is "dealing with hermeneutics". This is a recurring point of concern with regards to the report M/F and various synodical decisions, such as those concerning marriage and divorce. See next point for more.

2. *Objections to decisions made by general synods and the contents of deputy reports:*

- a. The GKv allow for "a speaking of the Holy Spirit that is not within the boundaries set by the Word of God and that is not based on clear biblical regulations", thereby detracting from the perfection of the Holy Scriptures. On this point the report of the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity mandated by the GS Harderwijk is cited.
- b. The same concern is voiced with regards to a "new manner of practicing ethics", in which "the style of the kingdom" is employed as the directive framework when it comes to judging situations in cases of divorce and re-marriage. This manner of dealing with the matters is viewed as subjective and as a departure from literal Biblical regulations.
- c. The study concerning the question whether Scriptures leaves room for women to fulfill an office is in direct contradiction to the clear Biblical doctrine the special offices are reserved for men only (1 Tim. 2:11-14; 1 Cor. 14:33-35; also Belgic Confession art. 30). The manner in which the report speaks of the meaning of culture also leads to a disempowerment of the exclusive authority of the Bible. Especially the use of hermeneutics in the report raises grave concerns and worries to a number of sister churches. The fear is that this opens the door to toleration of many other matters within the churches. Furthermore, there is great concern about the statement in the report that the clear revelation of Scripture (namely that only men should be ordained) may be seen as one option alongside various other opinions. The churches have the responsibility to disciplinary action against those who have these views and promote this kind of approach to hermeneutics.
- d. The broadening of the rules concerning the local ecclesiastical unity with a Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerk), approved by the GS of Amersfoort-Centrum

(2005) and Zwolle-Zuid (2008). The NGK allows women in office and are investigating the admission of practicing homosexuals into the offices; the churches tolerate a looser binding to the confessions. This unity with the NGK will lead to the undermining of the authority of Scripture.

- e. The GS Zwolle-Zuid decided to take part in the “Nationale Synode”, thereby promoting a false ecumenism.
- f. The ongoing addition of new songs to the songbook, many of which are not Biblical and Reformed.
- g. The omission of the old Article 31 CO in the revised Church Order. Although the new church order leaves room for objections on the basis of personal conscience, it is no longer possible for churches not to ratify decisions if these are deemed contrary to the Scripture or the Church Order. This is in conflict with the autonomy of the local churches as confessed and upheld in the Reformation of 1944.
- h. Some churches have indicated that they will review their sister church relationship or the existing correspondence if the GKv does not decisive distance itself from a Scripture-critical theology and does not clearly reject the report M/F.

Decision 1:

to treat the letters with objections by these sister churches abroad as letters received, addressed to the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Liberated).

Grounds:

1. In this way these sister churches have expressed their concerns. The synod takes note of this in view of the nature of the existing relationships with these sister churches: *The churches shall, as much as possible, assist each other in the maintenance, defence, and promotion of the Reformed confession, in accordance with Scripture, in doctrine, church polity, discipline, and liturgy* (Rules concerning the maintaining of sister church relationships, GS Ommen 1993).
2. The General Synod is the only, and as an extension of the sister church relationships also the only correct address to which these sister churches can direct their concerns. The sister churches may expect the Synod to deal with these objections, especially in light of the fact that the GS of Harderwijk stated that foreign sister churches should direct any objections to the general synod (Acts of synod Art. 87, decision 3).

Decision 2:

- a. to express that:
 1. the concerns of these sister churches are appreciated as sympathetic expressions of our unity in Christ Jesus;
 2. that the Reformed Churches are, and wish to remain, accountable for adherence to the Scriptures and the Reformed confessions;
 3. that today’s Reformed Churches, although no longer the same churches as forty years ago, but are not less Reformed;
 4. that the differences of opinion regarding certain authors, or regarding (parts of) reports by deputies, should not be blown up to objection against “the Reformed Churches”

Grounds:

1. The Reformed Churches are living churches existing in a rapidly changing ecclesiastical context in the Netherlands. The views on contacts with other churches, the role of the church federation (e.g. the need for uniformity within the federation), the task of the churches in society, and the necessity to present the gospel in a way that is relevant for today, are unmistakably different than in the eighties of the last century. The churches are finding their way in these matters that is deliberately in line with the Scripture and with the Reformed confessions. This way is not infallible and requires constant alertness. In this context the expression of the concerns by the sister churches is welcomed.

2. The Reformed Churches may be asked to give account for decisions made collectively, but not for various views of people or deputies for which the churches have not accepted responsibility.
- b. to express about the concerns and objections mentioned in 2, on basis of our unity in Jesus Christ:
1. that the charge that the Reformed Churches allowed for a speaking of the Holy Spirit that is not within the boundaries set by the Word of God and that is in contradiction of clear biblical regulations, thereby detracting from the perfection of the Holy Scriptures, is not substantiated by the evidence that has been presented;

Ground:

The given quotation, taken from the report of the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity, is about finding a way in the Christian life, which largely consists of decision-making for which there are no immediate biblical regulations, but in which God's children can "walk with the Spirit". The connecting of this quotation to other discussions, such as that of the grounds for divorce, is untenable.

2. that the ethical reflection on "the style of the kingdom", by connecting main themes in Scriptural data, precisely intended to do more justice to biblical data than is done merely by working with individual Biblical statements.

Ground:

The appeal to "the style of the kingdom" does not introduce a new category, from outside of the Bible, to the discussion on ethical reflection, but simply treats important biblical data comprehensively. Just as in the appeals to the doctrine of "the covenant", it focuses the attention on the unity of the Biblical message.

3.
 - a. that as yet no decisions have been made by the General Synod about the report presented by the deputies M/F, and that the concerns voiced by the sister churches will be included in the discussion;
 - b. that no hermeneutics is legitimate in which the context of the Bible or the context of the modern reader either (i) plays *no* role, or (ii) plays an *autonomous* role in the exposition and application of texts.

Ground:

It is good to address the concerns of the sister churches already before the treatment of the deputy report M/F, by a framework statement about hermeneutics. This statement does not involve a detailed, technical decision concerning hermeneutics, but delineates the boundaries of that discussion within the churches: no one wishes to operate outside of these boundaries. Because there are concerns that this may have happened, it is appropriate to make a clear statement to this effect.

4.
 - a. that the concerns about the talks with the Dutch Reformed Churches (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken), do not do justice to the agreement reached, on various subjects, by the Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity and the Committee for Contact and Cooperation (see the Reports of the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity from the previous synods on this point);
 - b. that the General Synod has not yet decided about the report presented by the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity, and that the concerns voiced by the sister churches will be included in the discussion.
5. that the "Nationale Synode" is a discussion forum, involving activities in which the Reformed Churches could possibly take part, taking into consideration the distinct identity and responsibility of the Reformed Churches (decision May 9th of this year);
6.
 - a. that the increase in the number of songs in the Reformed songbook has, until now, taken place in accordance with the existing regulations designed to preserve the Reformed character of the worship services (GS 1999 art. 58; GS 2008 art. 64);

- b. that also when other songs are used, the responsibility for the worship services lies with the local consistory, which in turn is held accountable through the regular ecclesiastical procedures (Church Order 2014, C37.1, F73 f.f.)
7. that the objection to the omission of article 31 CO is based on an interpretation of the article that has no longer been in force since the 1978 edition of the church order; in the exceptional situation that a church council feels unable to implement a synodical decision, the normal way is to give an account to the classis.

Ground:

The interpretation of Article 31 in the context of the so called right of ratification, as defended, for example, by P. Deddens in his “De ratificering der besluiten van meerdere vergaderingen” [Ratification of the decisions of various assemblies] (1946) was challenged by J. Kamphuis in his “Kerkelijke Besluitvaardigheid” [Ecclesiastical Decisiveness] (1970) and no longer in force in the Reformed Churches. The adoption of the Church order 2014 has not changed this.

Decision 3:

- a. to instruct the Board of Trustees of the TU to provide the synod with a concept response to the criticism submitted by the sister churches abroad of the publications by instructors and researchers at the TU. This response should take the form of a generous exposition, accessible to a broad audience, and it should address the individual publications.
- b. to advise the Board of Trustees to strive for the TU’s involvement in the continuation of the scientific dialogue with theologians connected to the churches that expressed their objections.

Grounds:

- 1. The Board of Directors supervises the Reformed character of the education and research at the TU and is primarily responsible for responding to objections raised against it (Constitution of the TU).
- 2. Objections submitted in the past have been refuted, but the communication of this refutation was possibly not sufficiently broad.
- 3. For the relationship with the sister churches, it is important to maintain a good exchange in the theological field, as recently happened at the Hamilton conference on hermeneutics.

Decision 4:

to urge the sister churches abroad to keep serving us and each other as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

Grounds:

- 1. Insofar our churches wish to remain in the confession of God’s Word there is no reason to review the existing contact.
- 2. Insofar our churches are increasingly dealing with the continued secularization in the lives of God’s children, we have much need of the support and forbearance of our sister churches abroad.