Dogma and Doctrine of the Christian Reformed Churches of North America

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I The Reformed Theological Accent

The Reformed Theological accent is broader than only its manifestation in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) family. The Reformed Churches stand in the tradition of Protestantism and specifically Calvinism, which has as its fundamental principle the doctrine of God's sovereignty, the authority of Scripture and "the need for disciplined holiness in personal Christian life, and finally, on Christianity as a religion of the Kingdom" (De Moor, [2001] quotes CRC-Publications. *A Sure thing,* 2001, 281. Cf. also Meeter, Henry H.1990: 16).

Reformed Christians confess their faith with the church universal in the words of the Apostles' Creed. The Reformation of the 16th century rediscovered the central message of the Bible – that one is saved by grace alone through faith, simply formulated in the following statements: *Sola Scriptura, Sola fides, Sola gratia.* Out of the Reformation came four main branches:

The Anabaptist,
Reformed,
Lutheran,
Anglican.

The CRC's theological articulation of its reformed worldview does not present a uniform image but overlapping emphases. In the Identity Statement document of the CRC, *What it means to be Reformed* (2006), three overlapping approaches to being Reformed are distinguished: Doctrinalist, Pietist and Transformationalist.

The Pietist emphasis accentuates the Christian life and personal relationship to God and represents the approach of significant groups within the Reformed tradition. Issues for pietists are: How do we experience God in our daily walk of life?

The doctrinalist emphasis accentuates an adherence to doctrines as taught in the Scripture and reflected in the Confessions which churches believe. It is characterized by a number of central theses:

The Reformed View of Scripture

The Bible is the inspired and authoritative claim of God's word on the lives of believers called to be subordinate to and obey His Word. *Sola Scriptura* means that the Reformers distanced themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, which asserts that Scripture, tradition and the teachings of the church are all equal in authority. Reformed Christians claim that God declares Himself to humans in His Scripture, which is a dramatic message of God's plan of salvation for humankind. At its core, the Bible is redemptive revelation (2 Tm 3:16-17 and 2 Pt 1:20, 21).

Creation, Fall and Redemption and New Creation

This confession is the way in which the Reformed Christian attempts to understand the Biblical message and history. It also advocates a "redemptive-historical" reading and interpretation of Scripture, which has been associated with Augustine, Calvin and the Dutch-Reformed theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries. It emphasizes the Bible's progressive story, or drama, of redemption through four major stages: Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation. (Col. 1:15 - 20).

The Lordship of Jesus Christ

This confession implies that there is no square inch of God's world where Christians are not called to proclaim the Lordship of Christ over creation. This confession represents a radical break with the sacred/secular and nature/grace dichotomies found in many traditions. All of human life and reality is thoroughly "religious", either in the service of the Triune God or of some idol. No dimension of life is more sacred than any other.

The Church

The Reformed Church has a strong emphasis on the need for the individual believer who belongs to the Body of Christ or the covenantal community of the church to participate in the local church, which is called to proclaim the gospel to the nations (1 Pt 2:9). The church is a worldwide church in all its history and diversity and comes to local expression in the institutional church and congregations. Justice and reconciliation is not just one of the things a church could do, it is one of the things a church must do as it is also called to constant renewing of the church through ongoing reformation. The institutional church is called to address a host of societal and cultural issues such as abortion, euthanasia, race issues, poverty, education, politics, marriage, sexuality, justice, capital punishment, peace and war, etc. On the other hand, the church as the Body of Christ is called to address all aspects of society through diverse institutional settings such as the Christian school, business, state, voluntary organizations, labour unions, etc.

Grace

The Reformed faith emphasises the radical and pervasive sinful condition of humankind and the need for God's saving grace. The grace of God is the unmerited favour of God towards those who do not deserve it. In this grace, the works of the believer play no role to deserve it, only as signs of gratitude for the gift of God's grace (Eph. 2:8 -10). God's grace in Jesus Christ is the root of all of human life, including the life of the unbeliever who exists by the grace of God. An important dimension of grace is the Reformed understanding of common grace. It prevents society, marred by sin, from totally disintegrating. Three distinct evidences of common grace can be discerned in the world: (Mt 5:43 -48)

God gives natural gifts to both believers and unbelievers.
God restrains sin in all people.
God enables unbelievers to perform positive acts of civic good.

Common grace reminds the believer that the conflict of this age (The *antithesis* as the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper called it) is between two spiritual powers, which cut through all of reality and society and the human heart.

Covenant

Both the Old and the New Testament reveal God's covenant of grace. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord 's Supper are signs of God's new covenant with His people. This calls His people to commitment and obedience and builds on God's faithful promises and commitment, which he renews in the proclamation of His word.

The third emphasis in the Reformed approach is the transformationalist. This approach embodies a heartfelt desire to relate the Lordship of Christ to all areas of culture, society and the world around us. This approach is especially appreciative of the work of Dutch scholar, theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, who led the

Doleantie movement in Holland in 1886. Kuyper's philosophy and theology has had a strong influence on the Reformed Christians of North America. Fruits of Christ's reign in the world and the coming of His kingdom become evident in: Christian colleges and universities, organizations for public justice and Christian labour associations. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the Christian Reformed Church in North America is the emphasis on Christian schooling. On the whole, these Christian schools and colleges are financially independent and do not receive any form of governmental subsidies. A few important emphases in this transformationalist approach are:

Personal Relationship to Jesus

The Heidelberg Catechism, which is one of the three confessional statements of the Christian Reformed Church, places strong emphasis on this personal relationship as it becomes clear in question and answer no. 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" That I am not my own, but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ".

Characteristic of the Reformed emphasis is the fact that it is always wider than only this personal relationship.

The Holy Spirit

Reformed Christians have a sincere appreciation of the work of the Trinity: God the Father in creation, the Son in redemption and the Holy Spirit in sanctification. The work of the Holy Spirit is comprehensive. It encompasses every dimension of the believer's life and the life of the church, the church's ministry and God's work of redemption. "The Holy Spirit is central in the Reformed understanding of the real presence of Christ in the sacraments and preaching as Spirit-charged encounters with God" (Identity statement: 22).

Gratitude

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that prayer is central to the believer's life of gratitude towards the Lord (Col. 3: 15-17). One of the most significant features of the Heidelberg Catechism is its placing and teaching on the Ten Commandments. They are placed under the section of "gratitude". Christians do not obey God in order to get rid of their guilt or in order to earn their salvation. They obey because God has already removed their guilt and given them the free gift of salvation. All obedience in the Christian life must ultimately come from the deep wellspring of gratitude.

Word and Sacrament

Ministers of the CRC are ordained to the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments. Preaching as exegesis and interpretation of Scripture plays an important role in the church. On the other hand, the sacraments are related to a diversity of other Biblical themes: The reception of the Holy Spirit, new birth, washing away sins, dying and rising with Christ, spiritual renewal, forgiveness, eschatological hope, etc. In the transformationalist emphasis the relationship of God's Word to the world is the central focus.

II Doctrinal Statements and Confessional Creeds.

There are two sets of creeds that are regarded as the basis of Reformed doctrine. The first set is the Ecumenical creeds which were written long before the church divided into various branches and is accepted by most Christian churches. The Ecumenical creeds are:

Apostles' Creed
Nicene Creed — church's response to Aryanism.
Athanasian Creed — clearest definitions of the Trinity and the incarnation.

The second set is the three Reformed Confessions, which are distinctively Reformed confessions of faith written at the time when divisions among Protestants were becoming permanent. They belong to the family of Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, which also includes the Westminster, Gallican and Scottish confessions. The Reformed confessions include:

The Heidelberg Catechism — 1563 composed in Heidelberg at the request of Elector Frederick III.

The Belgic Confession — 1561. Clear statement of faith in the time of the Spanish Inquisition

The Canons of Dordt. 1618-19. Adjudicating theological controversy with the Armenians.

Recently: some *new confessional statements* and testimonies have been added to the set of creedal documents:

A Contemporary Testimony. Our world belongs to God.

The Belhar Confession, formulated by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa and presented to the CRCNA.

The Accra Confession or Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth.

A few brief introductory notes about the first three creeds and confession will have to suffice.

The Belgic

The oldest of the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church is the Confession of Faith, popularly known as the Belgic Confession, following the seventeenth-century Latin designation *Confessio Belgica*. *Belgica* referred to the whole of the Netherlands, both north and south, which today is divided into the Netherlands and Belgium. The confession's chief author was Guido de Bres, a preacher of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, who died a martyr to the faith in the year 1567. The text, not the contents, was revised again at the Synod of Dordt in 1618-19 and adopted as one of the doctrinal standards to which all office bearers in the Reformed churches were required to subscribe.

The Heidelberg Catechism:

The name of the Heidelberg Catechism is derived from the city in which it was compiled and first printed. In order to put an end to religious disputes in his dominions, Frederick III determined to put forth a Catechism, or Confession of Faith, and laid the duty of preparing it upon Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, for a time professor in the University of Heidelberg, then court preacher to Frederick III. They made use of the existing catechetical literature, especially of the catechisms of Calvin and of John Lasco. Ursinus has always been regarded as the principal author, as he was afterwards the chief defender and interpreter of the Catechism.

The Catechism, in its present form, consists of 129 questions and answers and is divided into three parts:

Of the misery of man.

Of the redemption of man.

Of the gratitude due from man (duties, etc.).

The Canons of Dordt

The Canons of Dordt arose out of the Armenian controversy in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the early 17th century. Armenians are followers of Jacob Armenius, a theological professor at the University of Leyden who drew up five articles of faith that were presented to the Synod at Dordt (Dordrecht) as remonstrance to the beliefs held by the church at that stage:

1. God elects or reproves on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief.
2. Christ died for all men and for every man, although only believers are saved.
3. Man is so depraved that divine grace is necessary unto faith or any good deed.
4. This grace may be resisted.
5. Whether all who are truly regenerate will certainly persevere in the faith is a point that needs further investigation.

These five points were rejected by the Synod and it responded to the Remonstrance points with five points of Calvinism, which have popularly become known as "TULIP": total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints. God's saving grace is not universal but particular, given only to those whom God has chosen from eternity (Rm. 8:29, 30) who cannot be lost (John 10:27-28). Salvation is secure in the hand of God.

If there is one doctrine that permeates the Canons, it is the sovereignty of God with its corollary of God's faithfulness (Mouw, 2004:37). The Canons maintain that according to Scripture, God is sovereign in the salvation of the sinner and that the Armenian position violates this truth (Petersen Henry. 1968).

The more recent testimonies include Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony. The movement that produced the Contemporary Testimony began around 1970 and arose out of concern for the fact that the traditional confessional creeds of the CRC seemed not to speak clearly to a new generation of believers living in a secularised world. In 1983, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church approved "Our World belongs to God" as the church's prophetic voice in addressing the critical issues of our times. The final approval of the document was in 1986 and a revised version was accepted in 2008. It was called a "testimony" rather than a confession in order to distinguish it from the historic confessions of the sixteenth century and to preserve their central place.

It had been decided to approach the Contemporary Testimony from a single perspective: the biblical idea of the coming Kingdom — the theme of the testimony would be '"Our World Belongs to God". The testimony follows closely the storyline of the Bible. The Commentary has as its goal the exploration of the implications of the Testimony. It deals with *inter alia*: The Spirit of our Times, evolutionism, human rights, prayer, earth keeping, money, scientism, technology, genetic manipulation, feminism to futurology, fatalism, utopia, etc.

A more recent addition to the doctrinal creeds of the CRCNA is the Belhar Confession, originally developed in South Africa as a response to the church's role in an apartheid society. The Synod 2009 of the CRC brought the Belhar Confession before the church for consideration, stating that the synod shares with the whole church the profound nature of this moment in the life of the church and therefore it must not be entered into lightly but rather with godly fear and trembling, humbly trusting that the church will be faithful to the gospel. Synod plans to propose to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a possible fourth confession of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

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