

Reformed Churches in the Netherlands



At the moment I'm doing some prep work in relation to the coming Synod, to be held DV in Carman, Manitoba, in May 2013. Perhaps it's worthwhile sharing some developments and thoughts with the congregation.

Concerns

It's no secret that many in the Canadian Reformed Churches have their roots in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. That fact means the Dutch churches have historically been very similar to the Canadian Reformed Churches, and means too that many in Canada have an emotional bond to the 'mother' church overseas.

That explains, in part, the rather high level of concern within the Canadian Reformed Churches about developments in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Synod Burlington 2010 decided to "express our prayerful *concern* for our brothers and sisters in the Lord that they be committed to the Reformed faith" (my emphasis), and mandated a committee to express to the Dutch "grave concerns" (same word) on specific issues as well as "pay special attention" to a couple of other issues (see Article 86 of the *Acts of Synod 2010*). Late last year this committee submitted to the churches its report to Synod Carman. In its Conclusions, this committee writes:

The Subcommittee for Contact with the RCN is thankful for the open communications and meetings and discussions which we were able to have with the deputies of the BBK¹ of the RCN. We are also thankful for the desire for faithfulness to the Lord which we encountered in the RCN people we communicated and met with. The Spirit is certainly at work in the Netherlands, as can also be seen in the many organizations and groups which are involved in mutual support in various fields such as politics, science and education as well as in support for the disabled and for homosexuals (see *Handboek 2012 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, p.344 ff). Add to this the considerable works of mercy and outreach and what one sees is churches which are very engaged not only inwardly, but especially outwardly. We remain impressed by the active faith of our brothers and sisters in the Netherlands. Our prayer is that this activity of faith may continue and that the RCN may remain a beacon of faith in action as reflected in the above organizations.

Our contacts, however, have confirmed the concerns brought to Synod Burlington 2010 about the direction the RCN are moving as federation of churches. We were frequently assured in correspondence and in meetings that the RCN is determined to be true to God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity. But the more we busied ourselves with what has been decided and what is accepted in these churches, the more concerned we have become about the direction these churches are slowly but surely moving. We are afraid that this is a direction which is leading them into conflict with the Word as it is confessed and understood in faithful Reformed churches throughout the world.

¹ BBK is a Dutch acronym describing their Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad.

Details – Paas

The committee went on to flesh out the evidence for their concern. Synod Burlington had instructed the committee to “express our grave concerns” that “the Theological University did not exercise greater care in the case of the appointment of Dr Paas as lecturer; and to urge the RCN to deal with these matters as yet.” The Theological University in Kampen, we need to know, is the seminary of the Dutch churches where tomorrow’s preachers are trained. Dr Paas had earned his Doctors title with a book in which he left open the possibility that the people of Israel were not escaped Egyptian slaves, but instead arose from migrant and Canaanite populations. It is fact that saying such a thing is very acceptable in critical scholarly circles, but it does not agree with what the Lord relates in the Book of Exodus. When our committee brought the matter to attention of the Dutch brethren, they simply did not want to revisit the issue.... So our committee writes, “As far as we know this is the first time that unbiblical views are tolerated in Kampen. We therefore consider Paas’ appointment to be a watershed moment in the history of this institution”(pg 43). Further, “the matter is serious” because “the clear meaning and intent of the Scriptures no longer have the last say, but man does” (pg 51).

Details – van Bekkum

A more recent development concerns the fact that the Theological University in Kampen gave its approval (with high distinction) to a dissertation (by Koort van Bekkum) which argued that the sun in fact did not stand still, contrary to the plain statement of Scripture in Joshua 10. “According to his dissertation,” writes our committee, “the scholar has to decide what is truly historical in Scripture by comparing and giving equal weight to the relevant biblical as well as extra-biblical archaeological data. In this way the scholar can determine whether what Scripture claims to be true ... is actually true...” (pg 43f).

Details - Synod

Such developments are not issues that beset simply the Seminary. Various appeals were tabled at a recent Dutch Synod (2008) against questionable views expressed by several Seminary personnel, and all were turned down – whether the issues concerned alleged inaccuracies in the Bible, the framework hypothesis for reading Genesis 1, the value of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, homosexuality, the Roman Catholic mass or women office bearers. The committee expressed its dismay that the Synod showed itself “incapable of dealing substantively with the concerns from within the churches which were brought to this assembly” (pg 44).

Hermeneutics

At the heart of this inability, our committee suggests, is that a different way of reading the Bible is taking root in the churches. The sense is there that somehow the Bible itself is not the Word of the living God, but we –in step with our culture– need to find that Word in the Bible – as well perhaps as in God’s General Revelation in nature and in culture. Where there is a perceived discrepancy between what the Bible seems to say and what nature or culture seems to say, the scholar needs to make some hard decisions to discern what actually is the Word and will of God. In a word, this means that people receive a position above the Word so as to determine on the basis of preference or scholarship or credibility, etc, whether what the text says-on-the-surface is actually its real meaning. It is this same matter of how to read the Bible that opens the door in the Dutch churches to moving towards permitting the sisters of the congregation into the offices of the church as well as having greater tolerance for variation in doctrine.

Recommendations

In their recommendations to Synod (pg 54f), the committee proposes that the Canadian Reformed Churches “continue at this time the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the RCN.” Note the inclusion of the words “at this time”. To my knowledge, this is the first time in the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches that such words have been suggested for contacts with another church. It is a shot across the bow.

Further, our committee recommends that Synod Carman itself write a letter directly to the next Dutch Synod. This letter is not only to express our love for this sister church and pledge our prayers for them, but is also to “describe our disquiet” about developments in the Dutch churches, focusing especially on the matter of how Scripture is treated. This letter is also to express “a growing sense of estrangement between the CanRC and the RCN which we hope and pray will not lead to a parting of the ways in the future.”

Analysis

In my judgment the Committee appointed by Synod Burlington has done the churches in Canada and in the Netherlands a great service in preparing this thorough report. It speaks of much work and of deep analysis.

The question arises whether the concerns described in this report mean that the time had come to sever our sister relations with the Dutch churches. One could argue that doing so would send a clear signal to the Dutch brethren that they are on the wrong track, and would at the same time serve as protection for our own churches from potential negative influence. It seems to me, though, that now is not yet the time to insist on such a step.

Doing so would serve only to close the door to further discussion and admonitions. Better for now to keep that door open, even while we describe clearly (yes, for our own people too) what the actual concerns are. After all, Rule 1 for our Ecclesiastical Fellowship is (see *Acts* 1992, pg 33):

1. The churches shall assist each other in the maintenance, defence and promotion of the Reformed faith in doctrine, church polity, discipline, and liturgy, and be watchful for deviations.

We need to make the most of the opportunities this mutually agreed upon Rule provides.

There is, however, something in between all or nothing. Rule 4 & 5 read as follows:

4. The churches shall accept one another’s attestations or certificates of good standing....
5. The churches shall in principle open their pulpits for each other’s ministers....

I wonder whether the time has come to suspend particularly Rule 5. I realize that we do not often have a Dutch minister on our pulpit, and our churches do not any more often call a minister from the Netherlands. Even so, putting some parameters around Rule 5 would send the signal that we do not fully trust what is happening in Kampen and do not like what impact that can have on the preaching.

In closing

It remains to be seen now what our Synod will do with this report. Meanwhile, it is good and proper that we continue in prayer for our sister churches in the Netherlands.

Next time, DV, I’ll relate something about how some in Holland have responded to these developments.

C Bouwman
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