

Fragmentation in Holland – and Canada



In the *Bit to Read* of four weeks ago I detailed some concerns our Canadian Reformed Synods have expressed in relation to our Dutch sister churches. It turns out that there are also many in the Netherlands who share these concerns about what's happening in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. It's perhaps worth relating a bit about that.

Reformed Churches Restored

A couple of decades ago already a number of brothers in the Dutch sister churches began a new magazine (*Reformanda*) that sought to draw out how the churches needed to reform if they were to stay faithful to the Scriptures (and hence to the Confessions). This effort, extensive though it was, never received an echo in the churches. Several of those behind this work then issued (in 2003) a call for reformation in a brochure entitled "Let us Repent". This document detailed the errors the brothers saw arising in the churches, and called for local and federational acknowledgement of sin and hence repentance. This document was sent to every consistory within the federation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Not one consistory led their congregation to respond in the manner the Call indicated. Because of the lack of (positive) response, several concerned members felt they could no longer remain part of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. These members and their families found each other, and began to hold their own worship services in several towns and cities across Holland. In the course of months they formed a new federation of churches known as the Reformed Churches Restored (RCR). The leading figure in this federation was Rev P. vanGurp. It was the ardent desire of this federation to be fully faithful to the Holy Scripture and hence to adhere faithfully to the Three Forms of Unity as well. The magazine *Reformanda* was discontinued, and replaced by *De Bezuin*. Through this new voice, the Restored churches continued to point out the errors they noticed in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and so call the churches to repentance and/or summon concerned members to leave the RCN in favor of the RCR.

Over time, this federation grew, I believe, to some two dozen churches. But it found itself beset by its own problems, with as result that a number of its congregations left. Efforts to work some sort of healing and reconciliation between the RCN and the RCR have proven fruitless.

The Canadian Reformed Synod of 2007 passed a judgment on the existence of this federation (Art 143). Our Synod described their separating from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands as a "schism". That term, of course, implies that it was not lawful before God to leave the RCN; they should have stayed. I'll grant that I'm somewhat uncomfortable with such strong language simply because I think it is impossible for us in Canada to put our finger in the water 1000s of kilometers away and pronounce on what brothers in the Dutch situation ought to do before God. An appeal to Synod Burlington 2010 to soften this language was turned down (Art 106).

Reformed Churches – temporary federation

Half a dozen years ago a minister in the church in Kampen (Rev Hoogendoorn) was deposed from his office. A goodly percentage of the membership of his congregation did not agree that this deposition was Scripturally justified, and so –with Rev Hoogendoorn as minister– formed an independent congregation in 2009. In short order two congregations who had left the Restored Churches (see above) joined this separated congregation to form a new

provisional church federation. Since then some other churches and groups who'd left the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands joined this federation. Their desire is to remain close to the Word of God and the Confessions in their preaching and manner of worship.

Dalfsen

In 2010 a third group separated itself from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the town of Dalfsen. The minister (Rev Heres) as well as a large number of congregation members were disturbed that efforts to correct Scripture criticism in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands went unheard. So too were efforts to monitor attendance at the Lord's Table, as well as efforts to have the liturgy retain its Reformed character. A liturgical play in church in which a young man played the role of the Lord Jesus Christ was for them the last straw, so that this group of some 125 people left the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. They did not immediately join either of the two groups mentioned above because they hoped to be able to broker a union between these two federations. That, however, did not succeed. A year later a percentage of their members joined the provisional federation mentioned above, while recently the remainder of the congregation (together with Rev Heres) were received into the Restored Churches.

Contact

In its report to our coming Synod in Carman, our committee mentions that they have spoken with representatives of all three of these groups. They recommend that Synod "ask the [Canadian Reformed] Churches to pray that a true unity in the faith may develop within the fragmented ecclesiastical situation with the RCN and those who have left." They also request Synod to give the committee the mandate to remain in touch with these small federations.

Given that the Canadian Reformed Churches share so many of the concerns expressed by the Restored Churches as well as by the provisionally federated churches, it is fitting indeed that our committee remain in close contact with those brothers and sisters who felt they could no longer be at home in the sister churches. Theirs is no easy situation.

Complication in Abbotsford

Our contact particularly with the Restored Churches is, we ought to know, complicated by a disturbing twist in Canada. Back in 2007 four families from the Canadian Reformed Church of Abbotsford published an "Act of Secession, Abbotsford", and called the congregation to join them in public worship at an alternate location. The reason: "to liberate yourselves from the unscriptural decisions of General Synods 1992 through 2004 to establish and maintain ecclesiastical fellowship with the PCK, FCS, OPC, RCUS and the URC." These decisions were wrong (say the four) because these churches have an admission's policy to the Lord's Table that gives place to the error of pluriformity. The four wanted the Canadian Reformed Church in Abbotsford to distance herself from the Synod decisions about these churches, and when Abbotsford refused to do so the four concluded that Abbotsford was a false church.... So, it followed, one needed to liberate oneself from these unscriptural decisions and re-institute the true church in Abbotsford.

It turns out that no one from the Abbotsford church joined them. Two addresses that had earlier been excommunicated from elsewhere did join, as did two other addresses from elsewhere in the Fraser Valley. That small church is obviously alone and lonely, and has no minister to administer the sacraments.

It's not surprising that correspondence soon began between the Reformed Churches Restored in the Netherlands and the Liberated Reformed Church in Abbotsford, a correspondence that soon developed into a sister church relation with each other. So Rev

deMarie from the Restored Churches (I believe he spoke somewhere in the Peninsula a couple of years ago) has travelled to Abbotsford a number of times to preach the Word there and administer the sacraments.

Brokenness

What we have, then, is the sad reality that a group in the Netherlands that shares the same concerns we have about the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands has a sister church relation with a congregation in Canada that calls our sister in Abbotsford a false church. Something is obviously not right. We're confronted here with human brokenness and limitation.

What is the way forward? There is need, I'm convinced, for much humility on the part of all parties, be that in Canada or in Holland, be it the 'main' churches or the 'breakaway' groups (for want of better terms now). And with the humility comes the need to bend prayerfully over open Bibles to consider how the Lord would have us (re)act to one another, as well as how He would have us speak and live and believe His Word in 2013.

I find so striking that the Scripture repeatedly warns against arrogance. Arrogant people look down on others, judge them as wrong, even set themselves up as the best and/or final interpreters of God's Word. It is an evil that lies in the heart of each person on this earth. Yes, we need to speak Biblical words of admonition when we see a brother embracing sin – and that's true of federations as well. But it needs to be done in such humility. It implies deep awareness of own weaknesses and sins, and implies much compassionate effort to understand the pressure another is under.

Understanding the other does not mean condoning the other's decisions. But condemning his decisions without trying to understand his circumstances makes it very difficult for him to accept your admonitions.

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