

## The Form of Subscription Revision Committee Report

### I. Background

The history of the functioning of the Form of Subscription (FOS) in the Christian Reformed Church is a story about our denomination's determination to be and remain a confessional church. This is highlighted in the narrative of the history of the FOS as given in Report 38 of the *Acts of Synod 1976*, which concludes with this sentence: "It may be said that the adoption and use of the traditional FOS has been an integral part of the CRC's history as an orthodox, conservative, confessional church (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 561).

We believe two assumptions underlie this determination. The first is that a confessional church's identity and mission always arise out of a specific heritage of understanding ("standing under") the Scripture. In the case of the CRC, this heritage is the interpretation of Scripture as given in the historic creeds of the early church: the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed as well as the confessions of the church of the Reformation: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt, sometimes referred to as the three forms of unity. These creeds and confessions were acknowledged to be so constitutive of our identity and so critical to our mission in the world that continuity with them must be preserved. In other words, the church believed it must remain orthodox in order to be the church.

The second assumption is that the CRC viewed its orthodox identity to be so tenuous and its mission in the world so fraught with danger that a regulating instrument needed to be employed to keep us orthodox. The FOS, adopted essentially unchanged from its initial draft at the 1619 Synod of Dordt, was taken to be this regulating instrument. This assumption is evident in the statement made by Synod 1976 in its response to the overture of Dr. Harry Boer that, "the FOS is not intended primarily as the instrument by which the church examines its confessions in the light of Scripture and provides for the orderly revisions of the confessions. It is rather the instrument for safeguarding the administration of the Word and the government of the church in harmony with the confession" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 577).

Our committee believes that from 1976 on, the history of the FOS indicates that the first assumption remains true (that a church's identity and mission arise out of a specific heritage) while the second (that a regulatory instrument is needed to keep us orthodox) is increasingly being called into question. Increased cultural and ethnic diversity, the increase in new church plants, and the cultural moment often described as postmodernism are among the factors raising these questions.

It seems clear to our committee that, historically, the FOS has functioned negatively to effectively shut down discussion on various confessional issues rather than positively to encourage the ongoing development of the confessions in the life of the church. In other words, the FOS has been used to define a standard of purity in the church more than being a witness to unity. The variety of issues with signing the Form of

Subscription as well as attempts to change it indicate that office bearers today desire to be more guided and less silenced by the confessional documents.

The committee notes the following developments. In 1981, the wording of the FOS was challenged as being ineffective for use in a cultural situation considerably different from that at the beginning of the CRC. As a result, modifications were made in the translation of the FOS in order to make it more meaningful in the Native American languages of the Navajo and Zuni people.

Yet, when an overture offered by Mr. Herman Bouma came to Synod 1987 to simplify the wording of the FOS for the entire church, it was rejected—though it is true that a year later Synod 1988 did adopt some changes to make the wording of the FOS more contemporary.

Ten years later, however, Synod 1998 once again rejected an overture to revise the wording of the FOS, this time from Classis Thornapple Valley. Its proposal to revise the line, *all the articles and points of doctrine* set forth in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt *fully agree* with the Word of God as stated in the current FOS (*Agenda for Synod 1998*, p. 202), called for a much more substantial revision of the FOS than any that had been requested since 1976. The overture also sought to require different forms for elders and deacons and for ministers and professors of theology (*Agenda for Synod 1998*, p. 203). Synod's denial, given on the grounds that the regulations approved by Synod 1976 had adequately addressed the problem of *fully agrees* and that the promise to *teach diligently* is already open to interpretation of one's role (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 425, 426), once again appeared to affirm that the existing FOS was as valid and necessary for the church as it had been in the past.

But many people in the church continued to wrestle with this issue. In 2003 as a part of a dissertation for his master of theology degree at Calvin Theological Seminary, Rev. Ken Nydam sent out a survey to seventy new church development (NCD) church pastors and fifty established church development (ECD) church pastors within the CRC, seventy of which were returned. (*An Historical and Theological Assessment of the Problems with the Form of Subscription in New Church Development in the Christian Reformed Church of North America* [Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 2003]). Nydam concluded that while all churches want to retain some kind of doctrinal covenant for the CRC many churches also wonder, "if a document that was originally conceived in a historical context of intra-church skirmishes that had political ramifications and be applied to our contemporary mission environment" (Nydam 2003, 13).

In 2003, Fleetwood CRC, Surrey, British Columbia, (Classis B.C. South-East) overtured Synod 2004 to study the efficacy of the Form of Subscription on the grounds that many churches in that classis no longer used the FOS because many individuals had difficulty signing it. Classis B.C. South-East wrote, "When a tool such as the Form of Subscription becomes ineffective in our culture and time, a study into the reasons

and attempts to once again make it effective is justified" (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, p. 435).

Synod 2004 did not accede to the overture but in response to Overture 21, B, 2 stated:

Sensing that the overture of Classis B.C. South-East raises issues with respect to compliance with the provisions of the Church Order Article 5 among our churches, Advisory Committee 8 requests that synod instruct the Board of Trustees of the CRCNA to inquire of each congregation as to the methods by which the churches comply with the provisions of Article 5 and refer the results of such inquiry to Synod 2005 for whatever action Synod 2005 may deem appropriate.

(*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 633)

In late 2004, the executive director's office sent out a survey to all of the CRC churches. The BOT referred the results of the survey to Synod 2005, and, based on its review of the survey data, made the following recommendations:

1. That a revised edition of the Form of Subscription be presented to Synod 2006 for consideration and possible adoption,
2. That the proposed revision be drafted by a committee appointed by the Board of Trustees,
3. That the draft of a proposed revision be sent to the churches no later than January 1, 2006, and,
4. That the text of the proposed revision be printed in the *Agenda for Synod 2006*.

*Grounds:*

- a. The survey conducted among the churches indicates that a substantial number of churches believe that an update is desirable.
- b. The present form of the Form of Subscription contains statements that are subject to misinterpretation.
- c. A more contemporary expression of agreement will make the requirement more meaningful.

(*Agenda of Synod 2005*, pp. 619, 627-28)

## **II. Our mandate**

In response to the BOT's report and recommendations, Synod 2005 adopted the following recommendations:

That synod adopt the following recommendations with reference to the Form of Subscription (BOT Supplement, section I, H):

1. That a revised edition of the Form of Subscription be presented to Synod 2007 for consideration and possible adoption, with the understanding that the purpose of the revision is to clarify the meaning of the Form of Subscription.
2. That the proposed revision of the Form of Subscription be drafted by a committee appointed by the Board of Trustees.

3. In their work, we encourage the committee to take note of the guidelines as to the meaning of subscription found in the 2004 Church Order Supplements (p. 26).
4. That the draft of a proposed revision be sent to the churches no later than January 1, 2007.

*Grounds:*

- a. The survey conducted among the churches indicates that a substantial number of churches believe that an update is desirable.
- b. The present Form of Subscription contains statements that are subject to misinterpretation.
- c. A more contemporary expression of agreement will make the requirements more meaningful.

*(Acts of Synod 2005, p. 735)*

### **III. The process used by the current committee**

The present committee was appointed by the BOT in response to the recommendation of Synod 2005. The committee convened at a meeting in February 2006. In addition to meeting regularly, the committee took up contact with several other people concerning our mandate, in order to broaden our input. These included: Dr. Michael Goheen, Rev. Morris Greidanus, Rev. Andrew Kuyvenhoven, Rev. Kenneth Nydam, Dr. John Stek, and the late Dr. George Vandervelde. Their input has been of great assistance to us.

Synod 2005 appointed a committee to revise the Contemporary Testimony and Synod 2006 encouraged the study of the Belhar Confession and its consideration as a confession in our own denomination. The committee was aware of these matters as we went about our work.

### **IV. Rationale for the proposed Form of Subscription rewrite**

We confess that Scripture is the Word of God. It is utterly trustworthy and reliable in all issues pertaining to faith and life. However, our understanding of it is always limited and in need of refinement. In the words of missiologist Leslie Newbigin,

The responsibility of the church is to declare to each generation what is the faith. This is always a fresh task in every generation. No verbal statement can be produced which relieves the Church of the responsibility continually to re-think and re-state its message. No appeal to creeds and confessions can alter the fact that the Church has to state in every new generation how it interprets the historic faith and how it relates to the new thought and experience of its time. It belongs to the essence of a living Church that it should be able and willing to do so.

*(The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme, London: SCM, 1948, 137-38)*

The four-hundred year old FOS has traditionally been viewed as being the hallmark of a confessional church. However, the many years of conflicted discussion about the FOS in the CRC reveal the need for a doctrinal covenant more in harmony with current realities. We cannot afford to be more concerned about historical integrity than current

expression. Ironically, it has been under the current FOS's stern watch that a significant and increasing neglect of the confessions has occurred.

Our committee believes that a helpful way to view the confessions is to regard them as true snapshots in time of the church's self-understanding as it wrestled with Scripture in the light of contemporary issues. Understood in this way, the confessions offer deeply grounded guidance to the contemporary church by linking us to the past and reminding us to pay attention to what has been deemed vital in the past. However, there must be ongoing reflection and development as the church constantly seeks to explain what faithfulness to the gospel looks like in its time and place. Synod itself recognized this when it called for an update of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* because it serves "as a dynamic statement of faith [that] must be periodically reviewed and perhaps revised if it is to speak contemporaneously" (*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 734).

The church is a community of believers who by nature must continually reflect on its identity and mission in the light of Scripture and its context. Therefore, any regulatory instrument that is adopted by the church ought to be an invitation to the office bearers of the church to participate in this ongoing reflection rather than a document that precludes or hinders such reflection. To this end, we recommend, first, that the title of this document be *Covenant of Ordination* rather than *Form of Subscription*—a title that suggests enablement and participation rather than regulation and silencing. We recommend further that, because it is an instrument that enables participation and reflection, it be rightfully extended to all the office bearers of the church.

In this revised covenant, our primary subscription is to the Scriptures that we receive as "holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith" (Belgic Confession, Article 5). In an era of relativism, we emphasize the divine authority and universal validity of Scripture. Historically, the strong emphasis within the form of subscription on the primacy of the confessions has at times muted the voice of the Scriptures in the life of the church. We believe that our restatement properly focuses primary attention on the Scriptures as the authoritative source of our confessions.

That the gospel comes to believers in particular times and places cannot be overemphasized. Our confessions arose in a time of competing Christian traditions when confessions were written to accentuate differences and to defend against error; thus maintaining the purity of a particular tradition. Of course, insights gained at those times must not be lost, and it will never cease to be the historical fact and blessing that the Three Forms of Unity retain pride of place because of their seminal role in the birth of our confessional tradition. By accepting the historic confessions as faithful for their time and place, we will avoid both a hardening of contextualized truth into timeless truth and the fostering of a divisive attitude toward other Christians.

We wish to remain committed to the tradition of our historic confessions by continuing to attend to what they attended to—though it is an appreciative relationship that we seek, rather than a defensive one. Further, it must be noted that if we are to remain a truly confessional church, the confessions need to function significantly in

discipleship and education, helping us deepen our understanding of Scripture and of how the Reformed tradition has and continues to explicate and defend the gospel.

As Synod 2005 recognized, there is a continuing need for fresh, contextualized, theological reflection that addresses the culture of our time. For this reason, the committee includes *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* in our Covenant of Ordination as a warm expression of the Reformed tradition today, for it remains deeply linked to the confessions that preceded it, yet strives to address the context in which we confess our faith today.

The church has long realized that few church leaders can with integrity state that they agree fully with every jot and tittle of the historical confessions. Issues have included the revelations of ongoing scholarship that do not coincide with earlier understandings, ideas objectionable to modern sensibilities, as well as the growing postmodern sense that one simply can not, in any definitive fashion, fully subscribe to the understandings from a cultural time and place not ones own.

The church's response to this realization has been varied. Almost a century ago, Article 36 of the Belgic Confession was substantially revised. In 1976 a *confessional-difficulty gravamen* was added to the *confessional-revision gravamen* as a way in which people could respond to the concerns they had. As recently as 2006, a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism was placed in brackets and a footnote attached to explain this change. None of these changes have been fully satisfactory, and our ongoing confusion is attested by the necessity of synod's writing guidelines regarding the meaning of subscription as outlined in the *2004 Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure* (pp. 24-27).

In our proposed Covenant of Ordination, the obligations as office bearers are treated both positively and humbly. The removal of the stringent requirement to "defend," which has been the source of so many troubles, and the removal of silencing language, which has led so many churches and church members to simply ignore the FOS, creates a positive climate in which leaders can discerningly use the complex theological statements of the historic confessions as they continually reflect on the identity of the church in the light of Scripture and its contemporary context.

A flexible assumption has been built into the wording of this covenant. It is our committee's firm belief that in the light of new discoveries such as in stem cell research, and new challenges, for example from radical Islam, new expressions of our faith will be required. It is also our belief that our expressions of the gospel must be open to insights we gain from sisters and brothers in places such as China, Honduras, and Nigeria.

Our committee believes that our reformulation of the FOS accurately reflects the current situation and concerns in the churches. Our prayer is that we as a denomination will be able to discern between essentials and nonessentials and to continue growing as a vigorous, living branch of the living church. Adopting a more flexible covenant of ordination may be a small step in that direction.

Finally, we also deeply feel that no confession, nor required subscription to that confession, can, on its own, bring about unity or interest in our particular theological heritage. We need to intentionally teach and sing and speak confessionally, weaving our confessions into the fabric of our lives, around dinner tables and campfires as well as in church services. To that end, we present the following revision for the consideration of the churches:

#### A COVENANT of ORDINATION for OFFICEBEARERS in the CRCNA

We, the undersigned office bearers of the CRCNA heartily accept the authority of the Word of God as received in the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which reveal the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ, namely the reconciliation of all things in him.

We accept the historic confessions: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, as well as *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, as faithful expressions of the church's understanding of the gospel for its time and place, which define our tradition and continue to guide us today.

We promise with thankfulness for these expressions of faith to be shaped by them in our various callings: preaching, teaching, writing, and serving. We further promise to continually review them in the light of our understanding of the Scriptures.

Should we at any time become convinced that our understanding of the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures has become irreconcilable to the witness of the church as expressed in the above documents, we will communicate our views to the church according to the prescribed procedures and promise to submit to its judgment.

We do this so that the church will remain faithful to, grow in understanding of, and be diligent in living out this witness in all of life to the glory of God.

#### **V. Recommendations**

The Form of Subscription Revision Committee recommends:

- A. That this Covenant of Ordination be circulated to the churches by the BOT prior to Synod 2008 for their review.
- B. That, following the review, the Covenant of Ordination be submitted by the BOT to Synod 2008 for adoption with the recommendation that synod either accept it without revision or recommit it to the committee for further work.

C. That after the Covenant of Ordination has been approved by synod a liturgical form based on the covenant be prepared for use in our churches so that this covenant will be enacted by the churches.

D. That when the Covenant of Ordination is approved by Synod 2008 the committee be dismissed with thanks.

Form of Subscription Revision Committee

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*Note:* The committee is also willing to prepare a short study guide for use by our church councils or others if the BOT would deem this to be helpful in the future.