

Developments in our Dutch Sister Churches and Lessons to be Learned

By Cornelis Van Dam

This morning¹ let us consider some of the main developments in our Dutch sister churches (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands - Liberated or RCN) and what we can learn from them. It may be most useful to take the mandate that Synod Carman (2013) gave the committee for contact with the Dutch churches, along with some of the relevant decisions made by their recent Synod of Ede (2014-2015). During this presentation I will be making use of materials our committee has produced.² It should however be kept in mind that although I am a member of this committee, I am not speaking on its behalf.

Some have said that the committee has been quite negative in their past reports. There are a lot of good things going on in Holland as well. The committee has acknowledged that. As a matter of fact we stated in our report to Carman (2012):

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.³ Add to this the considerable works of mercy and outreach and what one sees in 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.

However, given the mandate and our concerns as sister churches, the focus was on negative developments.

To keep things manageable this morning, for this topic is huge, we need to be selective. Let us look at the following areas that were included in the synodical mandate: developments connected with the Theological University in Kampen, the role of women in the church, some aspects of the unity discussions between our sister churches and the Netherlands Reformed Churches, and the binding to the Reformed confessions.

Developments in Kampen

The Theological University in Kampen is the official institution for training ministers of the Word in our Dutch sister churches. It has an illustrious history and has been greatly blessed by the Lord

1. This material was presented at the spring Office Bearer's Conference held in the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church in Burlington on March 28, 2015.

2. Facts that may not be specifically footnoted are backed up in the *Report of the CRCA Netherlands Subcommittee on Contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands* to Synod Carman 2013 found at <http://www.canrc.org/?assembly=181>.

3. J. H. Kuiper, ed., *Handboek 2012 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Bedum: Scholma, n.d.), 344-67.

for the good of his people in Holland. It is however important to realize that this school is not only a training ground, “seminary” for ministers, it is also a university. As such it is to be a center for academic research and is subject to government regulations. Indeed, since 2010 it receives about half its funds from the public purse.⁴ Although this school officially strives for confessional faithfulness, in the last number of years there have been growing concerns of what is transpiring there.

These concerns all boil down to how Scripture is viewed and explained. There is evidence of a weakening commitment to the classic Reformed view of Scripture as articulated in the Bible (e.g., John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) and confessed in the Belgic Confession, Articles 2 to 7. For example, there were vigorous protests when Synod Zwolle-Zuid in 2008 appointed Stefan Paas as lecturer in missiology. These protests came because of his unbiblical views of Scripture and its contents in his Old Testament dissertation and elsewhere. He, e.g., did not accept the historicity of the biblical accounts of creation and the Exodus and claimed that Israel’s origins were from the Canaanite population and that Israel’s religion had roots in Canaanite thought.⁵ However, the response of the University and subsequent synods was that he is not teaching Old Testament and this matter is closed. As far as we know, this is the first time that unbiblical views were officially tolerated in Kampen. His appointment in 2008 was therefore a watershed moment in the history of this institution. Protests against his appointment continued, even to Synod Ede, which brushed these objections aside and later promoted Dr. Paas by appointing him as Professor of Missiology (*Acta*, Art. 6-15). When reflecting on these events, one needs to remember that the decisions of the Synod of Assen in 1926 affirming the historicity of Genesis 2 and 3 are technically still in effect in our Dutch sister churches. By tolerating and not undoing Paas’ appointment in spite of the legitimate objections brought against his work, the Theological University in Kampen will probably no longer be able to call anyone to account concerning unbiblical views and writings.

There were also justified concerns about Koert Van Bekkum’s dissertation, done in Kampen, and other writings. His methodology assumes that we cannot take for granted the historical factuality of what is recorded for us in Scripture. The biblical text needs to go into a dialogue with archeological research and findings to see what value the truth claim of Scripture has. The result is that the straightforward claims of Scripture are put aside because in Van Bekkum’s view these claims cannot be substantiated or verified. For example, 1 Kings 6:1 indicates that the Exodus took place 480 years prior to Solomon’s fourth year as king. But to accept this dating is according to Van Bekkum a “lazy man’s solution.”⁶ One

4. See the 2011 and 2014 reports of Raad van Toezicht en College van Bestuur van de Theologische Univesiteit, p. 18 and p. 14 respectively as found at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/deputaatschappen/curatoren-tu/>

5. See, Stefan Paas, *Creation and Judgement*, Old Testament Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 104, 113-114, 120 and e.g., the protest letter at http://www.refdag.nl/media/2009/20090121_Paas_artikel with references to his writing.

6. Koenraad van Bekkum, “From Conquest to Coexistence: Ideology and Antiquarian Intent in the Historiography of Israel’s Settlement in Canaan,” Th. D. diss published as a book (Kampen: Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 2010), 33.

apparently cannot just accept Scripture at face value. In his dissertation, he also called into question biblical events such as the sun standing still in the days of Joshua and elsewhere in his writings he denied that David killed Goliath.⁷ However, these concerns were also not heeded and the Synod of Harderwijk (2011-12) appointed Dr. Van Bekkum as Old Testament lecturer.

Other concerns around Kampen can also be mentioned. The issue of homosexuality is very much alive in the Dutch churches. The Theological University hosted a conference on the topic on January 20, 2012 of which the proceedings were published.⁸ The speakers were obviously not all agreed, but two general features are striking about the book containing the conference papers. There is very little exegesis or asking what Scripture says and there is much talk of the current culture and the need for the church to accommodate homosexuals as much as possible so that they feel welcome in the church. It is of course a given that the church should welcome all, but the point here is that biblical norms were not at the forefront in this conference but human perceptions and feelings.

For example, in chapter 5, Ad de Bruijne notes how times have changed. Not too long ago homosexual practice was virtually universally rejected. Now church discipline is hardly used against practising homosexuals in the Reformed Churches. According to him, only about a third of practising homosexuals are kept from the Lord's Supper. De Bruijne asks whether we should have a new approach since many homosexuals are leaving the church. To be sure he asserts that one cannot rest in homosexual behaviour. But De Bruijne also says that in a pastoral situation you may have to temporarily acquiesce in a homosexual relationship as those involved seek to grow in Christ. For this reason, he pleads for restraint or no church discipline around practising homosexuals. Such discipline only serves to alienate them from the church. Furthermore church discipline is not administered uniformly today so why should we pick on the homosexuals? But, De Bruijne continued that, as with all compromise, the full gospel and biblical norms need to be preached, including that sexual communion is to be only for the relationship between man and woman.⁹

It is noteworthy that while De Bruijne suggested the possibility of acquiescing in homosexual relationships out of pastoral considerations, Synod Zwolle-Zuid which took place four years earlier (2008) had taken a rather different position. This synod was faced with the question whether a consistory

7. See Cornelis Van Dam, "Interpreting Historical Narrative: Truth Claim, Truth Value, and Historicity," in *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today*, eds Mees te Veld and Gerhard H. Visscher (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 90 n. 26.

8. Ad de Bruijne, ed., *Open en Kwetsbaar: Christelijk Debat Over Homoseksualiteit*, TU-Bezinningsreeks (Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 2012).

9. Ad de Bruijne, "Vriendschap Voor Christen-Homo's," in *Open en Kwetsbaar: Christelijk Debat Over Homoseksualiteit*, vol. 11, ed. Ad de Bruijne, TU-Bezinningsreeks (Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 2012), 62–64. Synod Ede decided that the marriage of one man and one woman was the most fitting form ("meest passende vorm"). (*Acta*, Art. 8-12). Does this imply that there are other tolerable forms of marriage? Cf. Jochem Douma, *Afscheid Van de Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt)* (Hardenberg, NL: Heijink, 2014), 62–63.

should proceed with disciplining homosexuals who were living together because they had said that they would sexually abstain. Synod addressed the issue by declaring that the consistory is fully justified to continue in warning those involved because such a living together should be rejected. One must not underestimate the power of Satan and sin and place oneself into temptation. The church should also be aware of the negative consequences of publicly tolerating homosexual practice (*Acta*, Art. 52). Indeed, and De Bruijne's appealing to changing cultural contexts cannot undo the fact that Scripture calls homosexual relationships sinful. Our concern for doing God's will and upholding his ordinances should take precedence over being compromising to those struggling with homosexuality. This point was clearly brought to the fore by Dr. Wolter Rose who gave an excellent speech, upholding biblical norms and emphasizing that one's love for Christ should be determinative and have precedence over one's homosexual feelings. It is troubling to think that with a coming union of our sister churches with the Netherlands Reformed Churches in the making, homosexual relationships will likely be tolerated in the united church. After all, the Netherlands Reformed Churches now accept such relationships and are even studying whether practicing homosexuals can also be office bearers.¹⁰

One final negative example of what is taking place: most recently, Hans Burger, whom Synod Ede appointed as a lecturer in systematic theology in Kampen, has sent shock waves through the Dutch sister churches with an essay he wrote on the sacrifice of Christ. In that essay Burger acknowledged that Scripture speaks of Christ's death as a sacrifice. But he then goes on to say that "it is important to distinguish that from dogmatic articulations such as 'Jesus brings a sacrifice by bearing our punishment in our place as payment for our guilt. In this way he gives the required satisfaction to God and acquires our salvation.' This train of thought you do not find in this way in the New Testament."¹¹ Herewith, and in other statements in this article, he appears to deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The topic is obviously very important since the meaning of Christ's death is at the heart of the gospel. Burger has insisted that he is misunderstood and the discussion on this issue is ongoing. It is not clear where this will all lead to. For our present purpose, it is enough to note that this type of unclear scholarly airing of views that are confusing and apparently contradict our confessional understanding of Christ's sacrifice does not increase the confidence of the churches in their training for the ministry.¹²

10. On the official website of these churches, it is reported that "De commissie die antwoord moet geven op de vraag of gemeenteleden die een homoseksuele relatie hebben, ouderling of diaken kunnen worden, zal pas in het voorjaar van 2015 haar eindrapport klaar hebben." [The committee which has to answer the question whether congregational members who have a homosexual relationship can be elders or deacons will not have its final report ready until the spring of 2015.] <http://www.ngk.nl/rapport-ambt-en-homoseksualiteit-pas-in-2015-klaar/>.

11. Hans Burger, "Voorbij Het Offerkritiek (Het Beeld Van Het Offer)," in *Cruciaal: De Verrassende Betekenis Van Jezus' Kruisiging*, Henk Bakker and et al. (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2014), 53–54 (my translation).

12. For some of the critique and discussion in which Burger participated, see <http://www.eeninwaarheid.nl>. Also see the website of Rev. D. de Jong, <http://www.bijbelknopendoos.nl/>.

It is therefore not surprising that in light of what is all transpiring in Kampen, there appears to be a growing disconnect between the churches and their training for the ministry. The perception is that no strong Reformed leadership is forthcoming from the Theological University, a perception shared to a certain extent by those who teach there.¹³

A root problem in Kampen, in my view, is not taking seriously the authority of Scripture. If Scripture is not honoured as the authoritative and infallible Word of God, what then is left of normative Reformed scholarship? By not taking a strong position against unbiblical approaches, the question is whether Kampen will now ever be able to take a stand against unbiblical scholarship. Considering current developments, the future does not look very promising and this situation is very sorrowful. The Kampen university has enormous influence in the churches, especially through the ministers it trains. As that institution goes, so eventually will the churches.

Place of Women in the Church

Our sister churches in the Netherlands are slowly but surely moving to women in office. Important, supposedly biblical, justification for eventually opening the office to women is the research of Miriam Klinker de Klerk. When she was a doctoral student in Kampen, she was commissioned to research the relationship between men and women in the church. This commission was motivated by the request of General Synod of Zwolle-Zuid (2008) to Kampen for a scholarly reflection on this topic. In her study, she affirms that our context and culture is part of God's general revelation which needs to be factored in. You cannot just go by Scripture in determining the role of women in the church. It is striking that in her analysis of key texts she did not do justice to the place of creation ordinances with respect to the issue at hand.¹⁴ Her study was influential in the committee report that went to Synod Ede. It concluded, among others, that it was legitimate for a woman to serve as deacon, elder, and minister in the church, but in the present situation that does not mean that women should serve everywhere as office-bearers. There was a dissenting minority report which felt that the importance given to "culture" as well as the analysis of the "cultural contexts" were not convincing.¹⁵ Synod Ede decided on June 5, 2014 not to accept the conclusions of the majority report and to appoint a new committee to investigate the matter further (*Acta*, Art.. 3-22).

Just over a week later (on June 14) the Synod however made decisions that effectively overturned their decision on the role of women. When synod discussed their relationship to the Netherlands

13. Kuiper, *Handboek 2012*, 506.

14. Myriam Klinker-de Klerck, *Als Vrouwen Het Woord Doen: Over Schriftgezag, Hermeneutiek en Het Waaronder Van de Apostolische Instructie Aan Vrouwen*, TU-Bezinningsreeks (Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 2011), 17, 54–62, 129–33. Also see the discussion in the detailed committee report (i.e. Appendix 5) found at <http://www.canrc.org/?assembly=181>.

15. A handy brief English summary of the report is found in J. M. Batteau, "Man/Woman in the Church. A Summary of the Report to the General Synod 2014," *Lux Mundi* 33 (2014): 4–7.

Reformed Churches, synod asserted that there was now agreement with these churches on hermeneutics, that is, on how to interpret the Bible. Synod decided that since this was the case, “the obstacle that existed because of the decision of the Netherlands Reformed Churches to open the offices to the sisters of the congregation is now removed.” As ground it was stated that “in spite of the different practical results with respect to women in office, it has appeared that we as churches can trust each other with respect to accepting the authority of holy Scripture” (*Acta*, Art. 7-13). So while the front door to women in office was so to speak closed by synod not accepting the report of their committee, the back door was opened to women in office. In so doing, the synod did actually accept the proposal of their man/woman committee not to consider the issue of women in office as an obstacle in contacts with the Netherlands Reformed Churches.

And thus, the way of women to the pulpit is basically open; although no positive synodical decision has been made, although the churches are supposed to wait for a new report from their committee on the matter, and although there has been no consultation with any sister church, not even in Holland, on this momentous decision. However, the consequence of synod’s contradictory actions is already becoming evident. As is the case in other areas, such as liturgy and songs sung in worship, also in the issue of women in office, churches do their own thing without waiting for official decisions. The consistory of our sister church in Utrecht North/West announced in their worship service of February 22, 2015, that it has concluded that the position of male and female is the same before God and that the consistory intends to open the offices of elder and deacon to women. Classis Utrecht advised the church not to depart from the decision of Synod Ede, and thus not open these offices to women. The consistory, in consultation with other churches in the area, will now decide how and when they will follow through on their intent to ordain women.¹⁶

Another development is that on May 31 of this year the first female is set to deliver a sermon in our sister church in Haulerwijk. This woman is a member of this congregation and studies preaching at a Baptist seminary in Amsterdam. She is being trained to be a prison chaplain. But she needs to fulfill practical requirements including delivering a sermon. Her consistory obliged to give her this permission so she can fulfill this course requirement and so help spread the gospel in prison. Of course the end does not justify the means. The whole thing is a bit puzzling because she also conducts services from time to time in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN) and twice a month conducts services in jail.¹⁷ Could these occasions not have satisfied her course requirements?

These developments have not come out of the blue. Prior to this a female theologian, Almatine Leene, a former member of the synodical committee dealing with the issue of male and female in the church, led services in the Titus chapel, a Reformed Church liberated, in Amsterdam. In 2012, the Stroom

16. See for this information <http://www.gkv.nl/intentie-ambt-open-voor-vrouw-gkv-utrecht-noordwest/>.

17. See further <http://www.eeninwaarheid.info/index.php?rub=9&item=1127> .

church in Amsterdam, a mission plant, wanted to be instituted as a full-fledged church in the federation. However, since women have leading roles in the church, the classis to which the request came decided to study the matter further, in part because of the outcry in the churches.¹⁸

Looking ahead, the synod of Ede decided to charge a new committee to investigate how the church offices can be given Scriptural content, so that within this framework women can serve God's kingdom (*Acta*, Art. 3-22). When one considers that since the Synod of Zwolle-Zuid (2008) reports on the place of women in the church have been submitted to synods without ever being able to show that Scripture mandates that women serve in the offices of the church, then it is doubtful that this new committee will be able to do so. Scripture is clear on this point. Only by making the text say what it does not say will the churches find reason to open the office to women and many fear that this is precisely what will happen.¹⁹ New young professors at the Theological University in Kampen, such as Hans Burger and Hans Schaeffer, see no problem with ordaining women. Indeed, the majority of those teaching in Kampen are now in favour of women in office.²⁰

Confessional Subscription

At synod Ede a new form of subscription for office bearers was proposed. The main changes are underlined:

We, the undersigned, heartily declare that we agree with the doctrine of the Bible, as it is confessed in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dort. We promise to lead the congregation from out of this one gospel in our talk and life. We promise to openly carry out the truth of God's word and to uphold it over against misleading ideas that arise within the church or from out of the world. Should we experience a difference between any part of the teaching of the Bible and the contents of these confessions we will raise this in an appropriate way. Should questions arise about our own beliefs or conduct, we are always prepared to give an account of them. In both cases, we will abide by the directives of the responsible ecclesiastical assembly.

Formerly, one who had difficulties promised

If at any time in the future it should happen that we would disagree with this doctrine or any part of it, we promise that we will not propose, teach, preach or publish our opinion, either publicly or privately; rather, we will first submit this to the church via her assemblies for judgment. We are willing to submit to their decision; if we refuse we will by that very fact be suspended from our office.

There is quite a difference. Whereas before one had to keep silent and submit the matter to the consistory, now one is simply obligated to raise their difficulties "in an appropriate way" or "give an

18. Albert-Jan Regterschot, "Vrouw in GKV Gaat Met Voorzichtige Stappen Naar de Kansel," *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, 24 March 2015.

19. See, e.g., the pessimistic outlook presented, with reasons, in Douma, *Afscheid*, 27–28.

20. As reported in Regterschot, "Vrouw in GKV".

account of them.” These vague guidelines leave open the possibility that someone who disputes parts of the confession can write, teach, and propagate his views. For who determines what is “an appropriate way?” Does the one with problems decide, or the church federation, or the consistory? It is vague and therefore open to abuse. Furthermore, the new form says that “we will abide by the directives of the responsible ecclesiastical assembly.” What does that mean? Is it simply up to the consistory to determine subsequent action? Is suspension from office no longer a given? These type of questions needed answers.²¹

When Synod Ede dealt with the proposed new form for subscription (January 17, 2015), it made amendments so that the crucial part of the revised form reads:

Should we experience a difference between any part of the teaching of the Bible and the contents of these confessions and our difficulty cannot be removed, we will submit our objections for the judgment of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Should questions arise about our own beliefs or conduct, we are likewise prepared to give an account of them to the ecclesiastical assemblies. In both cases, we will abide by the directives of the ecclesiastical assembly.

There is a noteworthy improvement. The vagueness of raising the matter “in an appropriate way” has been replaced with a clear reference to the ecclesiastical assembly. However, it is somewhat disconcerting to see injected the phrase: “and our difficulty cannot be removed.” This phrase suggests that there is room to publicly ventilate your difficulty in a sermon or in writing since it is legal to seek to take away the difficulty. In the old form, one had to submit one’s difficulty straightaway to the consistory but that is no longer the case. Further, with the old form one promised not to teach, preach, or publish one’s disagreements with the confessions. That is also no longer true. So there is more toleration with the new form.²²

There are reasons for concern. The missional (missionaire) church of Stroom in Amsterdam has a history of trying to push the boundaries as to what is tolerated in our Dutch sister churches. When leaders in the church were appointed, it was not considered necessary to ask them if they agreed with the confessions of the church. Furthermore, women are already in the ruling body of this church and to have your children baptized is not considered necessary if you and your family wish to become members. Indeed, a minister working in Amsterdam and at one time teaching in Kampen indicated on his blog that in his view the time for maintaining confessions and church order was over. Another reason for concern is that the churches with which our sister churches are seeking union, the Netherlands Reformed Churches, have a reputation for tolerance and not for subscription to confessions.²³

A few additional comments on the drive for union with the Netherlands Reformed Churches are in order.

21. Douma, *Afscheid*, 38.

22. For the new form see “Definitieve tekst nieuw bindingsformulier GKv” at <http://www.werkenaaneenheid.nl>.

23. Douma, *Afscheid*, 33–40.

Union with the Netherlands Reformed Churches

There is an irresistible push to become one with the Netherlands Reformed Churches. About fifty years ago, these churches became separated from our sister churches. They generally wanted a looser binding to the confessions and they now also have women in office. Since 1993 there has been a growing contact between these churches and our sister churches. It is instructive to have a bird's eye view of what has happened over the subsequent years in their relationship.

Up to 2005, synods and committees of our sister churches identified considerable obstacles to a closer relationship with the Netherlands Reformed Churches. So, for example, General Synod Amersfoort Centrum (2005) expressed its disappointment with the decision of the Netherlands Reformed Churches to open the ecclesiastical offices to women and called it a serious barrier to closer relationships. Deputies for contact with these churches were then instructed to talk about this and also about the place of the confessions in the life of the church (*Acta*, Art. 135).

The next synod (Zwolle-Zuid 2008) received two reports, a majority report which was quite optimistic with respect to a binding to the confessions. That issue was no longer considered to be an obstacle. The minority report disagreed. It said that the Netherlands Reformed Churches have not changed. The result was that Synod no longer mandated its deputies to continue discussions with a view to a merger, as the deputies had recommended, but to discuss with the committee of the Netherlands Reformed Churches the three topics that keep coming back: (1) the differences in binding to the confession; (2) the differences in dealing with ongoing deviations from the confession; (3) the matter of women in office within the Netherlands Reformed Churches (*Acts* Art.112). However, the amazing thing is that these deputies did not do what synod had asked them to do.

Synod Harderwijk (2011) received an upbeat report which detailed discussions about baptism, the Holy Spirit and the church, and the Lord's Supper—none of these topics had been on their mandate. However the report stated that on the basis of agreement in these areas there is much harmony between these two church federations. However, the harmony spoken of was only imaginary. For example, office bearers in the Netherlands Reformed Churches who reject infant baptism and do not sign a subscription form are still accepted. Nevertheless General Synod Harderwijk 2011 decided to receive this report of their deputies and its appendices with thankfulness and instructed their deputies to continue the discussions with the Netherlands Reformed Churches, with the specification that the discussion should focus on two topics: (1) women in office, and (2) the manner in which local churches handle the binding to the confessions. Synod considered that the results of the discussions so far gave enough confidence to continue with the expectation that in the near future the discussion could be focused on ecclesiastical unity (*Acta*, Art. 81).

Reflecting on these developments, one gets the feeling that the local contacts are apparently going so well that the brothers fudge the major issues at the federational level to keep the momentum going. But church unity is a serious business. If there is no clear agreement on the authority of Scripture and the confessions, such a lack of agreement shows a weak resolve in maintaining the primary normative place of Scripture. And indeed, this “rush” has impacted negatively on issues like women in office and our sister churches are the big losers in terms of staying faithful to the Bible. The Netherlands Reformed Churches have not changed, but our sister churches have. And so the reason that our sister churches are poised to become united with the Netherlands Reformed Churches is because they have shifted from their positions and not the Netherlands Reformed Churches. Synod Ede has declared that there are no longer obstacles with respect to interpreting Scripture (and women in office) and therefore gave the mandate to current deputies “to continue the contact with the Netherlands Reformed Churches and to proceed from talks to discussions with an eye to church unity” (*Acta*, Art. 7-13).

Some General Observations

It is not a rarity within the bond of our sister churches that a local church goes its own way in disregard for a particular decision of synod. We saw that with the issue of women in office. Congregations feel free to do their own thing, regardless of what a synod may have decided. For example, when I taught in Kampen in the fall of 2012 students told me openly that their consistories have disregard for synod decisions when it comes to picking songs to sing during the Sunday worship services. The indifference to synod decisions is also evident from Dr. De Bruijne’s observation, noted earlier, that church discipline with respect to homosexuality is rare and he himself also counselled for restraint or no discipline for practicing homosexuals.

Another observation is that many churches are itching to have change. It struck my wife and I that in virtually all the worship services we attended in the Netherlands, it was always a woman reading the Scripture, never a man. It is hard to escape the thought that along with the change of having a female reader there is also a process of desensitization going. Is it to prepare people for seeing a woman preach from the pulpit? Another change we noticed is that the reading of the law was also dropped from time to time and some New Testament passages read, or nothing at all was done to take the place of the Ten Words of the Covenant. Why is that? Can people no longer bear to hear the words from the Sinai? Also, should churches not stick to the liturgies that the federation has adopted to be used in their worship services?

A common denominator in all these developments appears to be a desire to fit in with the current Dutch culture. It is considered very important that the place of the woman in the world outside be also reflected inside the church and that the music of the world outside be also played inside. There is talk of trying to keep the young people in church and being appealing to those outside.

Yet, for all this talk and rhetoric, church attendance is dropping, young people are leaving and concerned people who have given up on their church are leaving as well. In 2003, our sister churches had almost 127,000 members. The 2015 *Handboek* of these churches now mentions a total for last year of 120,688. The reasons for leaving vary. Some drop out of the faith altogether, others go to evangelical churches, others, wanting to remain Reformed, join those who had already left for doctrinal reasons.²⁴

Those Who Left to Remain Reformed

There are currently two groups of churches that have their origin in our sister churches. There is contact between these two groups and it is to be hoped that they can get together and provide a united front and thus be an attractive address for those who are giving up on our sister churches to go to. The Canadian Reformed deputies have been in touch with both of these groups.

Reformed Churches Restored (DGK)

These churches are composed of people who were the first to separate from the Reformed Churches - Liberated. In 2003 they published an Act of Separation and Return. Dr. P. van Gurp and Rev. S. de Marie were important in the early years and continue to have influence in this federation. Initially there was considerable internal dissent in this group which resulted in fractures in their fellowship. They have regrouped so to speak and others have joined them (like Rev. E. Heres of Dalfsen). They appear to have a total of three active ministers.²⁵ They have a magazine, *De Bazuin*, but have unfortunately accepted a sister relationship with an assembly of former Canadian Reformed members that meets in the Fraser Valley around Abbotsford. It is to be hoped that they take a second look at this relationship. As Canadian Reformed Churches we are unable to accept such a sister relationship. The Reformed Churches Restored have 12 congregations.²⁶

The second major group composed of those who have left our sister churches is the

Reformed Churches Netherlands (GKN)

They originated from 2003 and subsequent years. The name of this federation was decided in 2009. From the outset these churches were more moderate in stating their position. The website of these churches indicate that there are nine places where they come together to worship (Assen, Zwolle, Ede-Veenendaal, Goes, Hardenberg, Kampen, Twente, Zwolle and Zwijndrecht). Church services are held twice on Sundays. They have three active ministers: L. Heres, E. Hoogendoorn, and R. van der Wolf.²⁷ Dr. J. Douma, emeritus professor of ethics, together with his wife, have also left our sister

24. "Meer vrijgemaakten verlaten de kerk" reported on 24 Feb 2015 at <http://www.gkv.nl/meer-vrijgemaakten-verlaten-de-kerk/>

25. S. De Marie (Zwolle), E. Heres (Dalfsen), C. Koster (Berkel/Bergschenhoek) <http://www.gereformeerde-kerken-hersteld.nl/kerken>.

26. The website of these churches is <http://www.gereformeerde-kerken-hersteld.nl/>.

27. <http://www.gereformeerdekerkennederland.nl/kerken/>

churches and joined the Reformed Churches Netherlands in November 2014. He justified his departure in a small book entitled *Afscheid (Departure)*.

What Can We Learn From These Developments?

It is relatively simple to criticize someone else. It is much more difficult to look at ourselves and see if there are weaknesses with us in the light of what is going on in the Netherlands. We are no less prone to the spirits of the age than our Dutch brothers and sisters. What we have is all of grace alone. So we must be aware of a “holier than thou” attitude. We face our own challenges and we should consider in all humility what we can learn from the disquieting events on the other side of the ocean. Let us first consider the place of the training for ministers.

The Seminary

Events in Holland show how critically important it is to have a training for the ministry that is faithful to the Scriptures and has a close and meaningful relationship with the churches. We can be thankful to the Lord for our current faithful faculty at our seminary. This is a great gift of God. It is also very good that faculty regularly travel to the churches in western Canada, give presentations, and seek in numerous ways to foster a healthy bond of the seminary with the churches. Now southern Ontario is not part of these regular excursions and I realize that professors are regularly on the pulpits in this province but it would be good if the speeches they give to the western churches also be presented here. We should do everything possible to encourage a close relationship between the seminary and the churches. The seminary exists for the churches and is in the service of the churches. It should never simply become an ivory tower academic institution.

That is a challenge that Kampen is facing. They realize their need to train ministers, but the pressures of academia and government regulations also mean that they have to spend considerable manpower on purely academic research. The Theological University receives regular visits from government officials whose task it is to make sure that the university is maintaining the proper standards. Now our seminary also has regular visitation from the Association of Theological Schools through whom we have academic accreditation. But we have no pretensions of being a university and so the norms governing our accreditation are much more congenial to the task at hand. We are also blessed with a far more robust conservative scholarship in this continent than is the case in Europe. In a sense the pressure of secularized biblical scholarship is less here than in the Netherlands. We can be thankful for that. We have encouraged our Dutch colleagues to interact more with conservative North American biblical scholarship through organizations such as the Evangelical Theological Society and others, along with their conferences. That would help them in their work, also as academics.

In my view, the work of a Reformed seminary should make use of the best academic tools possible but use them in a biblical, counter-cultural way. In the past the word antithesis was used when it came to theological education. It was a favorite term of Abraham Kuyper. Today much theological education in Kampen is no longer done that way. We need to remain counter-cultural by being faithful to the Scriptures. They set the tune and should determine our hermeneutics and not the current culture. This can be a very difficult area but we should keep the main contours of the issue clearly before us.²⁸

The Place of Women

The only real issue on the place of women in our federation is whether women voting should be allowed or not. Since this matter would probably come up in question period, I thought I would briefly touch on it here. This has become a hot-button issue for many in our midst, and I respect the genuine concerns that are raised. However, I would like to remind the brothers not to make more of it than it is. It is true that in Holland women in office has followed chronologically to giving the women the right to vote. But observing a chronological sequence is not the same as proving that simply giving the women the right to vote must lead to women ordination in ecclesiastical office. The reasons for the one decision are different than the reasons for the other. What is driving the discussion in Holland is the pressure of culture and they twist and turn to try to make the Bible say what it does not say. “If women are mayors and judges why can they not be elders and ministers?” That is what you hear and what we heard at Synod Ede. We should not get too wound up about the voting issue. The issue will probably return to our next synod but we should not blow this matter out of proportion. There is something to be said for Synod Burlington’s decision that gave some freedom in this area. This matter should not become a litmus test for orthodoxy. It is important to realize that stalwarts of the Reformed faith such as Lucas Lindeboom (1845-1933) who taught New Testament in Kampen and Herman Bavinck, the well-known Reformed dogmatician (1854-1921), were in favour of women voting. Our sister church in Scotland has had women voting for over a hundred years and the United Reformed Churches have the same practice. We have never raised the issue with them as being evidence of degeneration. Neither of these sister churches would even contemplate opening the office to women. What is important is that we need to be faithful to Scripture and vigilant with respect to cultural influences and remain counter-cultural.²⁹

This brings us to the next area.

28. See, e.g., Van Dam, “Interpreting Historical Narrative,” 94–96.

29. See on this Cornelis Van Dam, “Slippery Slope?” *Clarion* 60 (2011): 234–36. On the Free Church of Scotland and others who allow female members to participate in voting for office bearers, see the report that served Synod Ommen 1993. *Bijlage 3: Commissierapport inzake het vrouwenstemrecht.*, §7.6.2 available at www.kerkrecht.nl/.

The Cultural Challenge

A huge underlying issue is the matter of culture. How does the church and the seminary relate to the culture of the day? Canadian Reformed visitors to our Dutch sister churches sometimes get a shock when attending worship service there. Now there are still places in the Netherlands where the traditional worship service remains the standard. However this is often no longer the case. There is a desire for change and a genuine heartfelt need to be more relevant to the culture of the day. You hear things like: “people need to feel more at home in our worship service; strangers should feel more welcome.” Also “I don’t get much out of church; it should be more relevant. We need change in order to hang on to our young people.” And so elements of the dominant civic culture are brought into the church. One hears similar sounds in our own circles. How should one respond to these sort of sentiments?

The topic of liturgy and how we conduct our worship services is of great importance. It concerns how we approach God and is therefore also a reflection of how we think of him. In a way, the Sunday liturgy sets the tone for our relationship with God and how we view ourselves as Christians. The area of liturgy has also become a bit of a touchy subject in some churches in our federation. In discussing these matters we need to keep some basics in mind.³⁰

First, we worship in order to bring praise, honour, and thanksgiving to God. We do not worship for ourselves in the sense that our needs are in the forefront. God is in the centre. He is the object of our worship. Second, we worship to place ourselves in Gods’ presence to receive his blessing and to hear the gospel and use the sacraments. When people raise questions about our services becoming more user friendly and more appealing to outsiders, the sorts of questions that one hears in Holland and also here, then we forget that worship is not in the first place for evangelism or to make people feel good and comfortable. Unbelievers in the presence of holy God should feel uncomfortable. Our worship services must carry a sense of awe of the holy. We are in God’s presence. How we think of that is also reflected in how we dress for worship. There is a very fine line that can be crossed when we speak of worship being more inviting and more open to outsiders; when we ask, what do *I* get out of the service, instead of asking, what am I giving to God in terms of thanks and praise? There is the danger of a narcissistic self-interest that is endemic in our culture but that is hostile to the gospel. Worship is not about being comfortable and making you feel good. Office bearers need to counter such thinking every step of the way. That may prevent unhelpful distortions to our liturgy and manner of worship and keep the focus on the Lord our God and his Word. The Word is the sword of the Spirit by which hearts are changed and the church is gathered (Rom 10:8-17; Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). The church is not gathered and hearts are not

30. For what follows, see, e.g., Cornelis Van Dam, *Perspectives on Worship, Law and Faith: The Old Testament Speaks Today* (Kelmescott, Western Australia: Pro Ecclesia, 2000), 22–25 and A. J. de Visser, “An Attractive Church,” *Clarion* 54 (2005): 418–20.

changed by music that tries to imitate current cultural styles and can bring worldly influences into the church.³¹

Besides having a clear biblical vision of what worship is all about, consistories should make sure that the minister is in charge of the liturgy, not a music committee. Part of the problem in the Netherlands is that music committees or liturgical committees have been given too much to say and control elements in the liturgy. That responsibility should belong to office bearers.

Another lesson we can take from events in Holland is that we encourage and remind the churches to honour the bond of the federation that unites us together. By adopting our *Book of Praise*, we have agreed as churches to abide by the basic classic orders of worship as printed therein. We should stick to those. For example, in the Netherlands not a few churches leave out the reading of the law. This should not be done. If there should be a minister or consistory in our midst that thinks the law should not be read, let reasons for this position be presented to a major assembly with the request that the option of not reading the law be including in our order of worship. Then a discussion can take place and the matter dealt with in an orderly and edifying way. We should avoid the situation where one church tries something like this and does it more and more without too much objection from its members and the practice gradually spreads without any discussion. In the process we lose a major part of worship without any due process. Similarly, we should remember the agreement to have preaching using the Catechism in the afternoon service and not another free text. This ensures that the major areas of biblical teaching are covered and that the proclamation of the Word remains balanced and instructive.

Similarly, we should not introduce songs into our official worship services that are not in the *Book of Praise*. Such an inclusion could sometimes be justified by saying that such and such a hymn means more to me. It helps me. It is good for me. (Again the person is put in the centre.) This is not a matter of being legalistic. Much is at stake here. We have agreed as churches what goes into the *Book of Praise*. Hymns convey a theology and if the theology is not biblical, the hymn will ultimately have negative effects on the well being of the church. History has shown how wrong hymns can introduce bad theology to the hurt of the body of Christ. We should honor our agreements made with each other in the federation also in this respect. Some of these issues can be particularly challenging for a mission church plant. It is tempting to bend the rules for such a work. But if certain hymns are deemed to be especially good for home mission, let them be included in the *Book of Praise* in an orderly way. The process that developed in Holland is not good. Hymns were included in worship that had not been approved by the federation. Eventually, there were few criteria and just about everything went. In the end, Synod Ede

31. The large part that music has come to play in many worship services is due to charismatic and Pentecostal influences. See, e.g., W. Robert Godfrey and D. G. Hart, *Westminster Seminary California: A New Old School* (Escondido, CA: Westminster Seminary California, 2012), 83-87. I witnessed a worship service in one of our Dutch sister churches that at certain moments totally contradicted the holiness of worship in the presence of God especially when the youth band got going with a gyrating lead singer.

approved a massive collection of more than a thousand hymns, *Liedboek-Zingen en bidden in huis en kerk*, and left it up to the local church to decide what is Reformed (*Acta*, Art. 5-12).³²

Another aspect of the cultural challenge we face is church discipline. Our civic society considers it mean and vindictive to exercise church discipline. Let everyone do his or her own thing. Do not be hard on each other. Everyone has his or her rights to be different. This spirit has infected the Dutch churches with an acknowledged lack of consistent discipline. We should never give into this cruel spirit of the times. Church discipline is the loving administration of God's mercy in calling a sinner back to himself. We need to continue to show the love and mercy of Christ in this way.

More examples of cultural influence in the church can be mentioned, such as the acceptance of scientific theory instead of the plain teaching of the Word of God in matters of evolution and creation; or the acceptance of supposedly sure archaeological theories as if they were proven facts to the detriment of the clear testimony of Scripture.

In Conclusion

Perhaps the present discussion can best be summed up this way. Christians and the church as a body should be counter-cultural, challenging the ungodly elements in the culture of the day. Rather than being eager to be "with the times" and seek to adapt as closely to the world as possible, we should rather recognize the antithesis that runs through all of life and seek to renew church life and culture in general in line with God's expectations. Does Scripture and therefore does God not exhort us: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2).

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32. Cf. the critique in J. P. C. Vreugdenhil and H. Vreugdenhil-Busstra, *Lied Tegen Het Licht: Handreiking Bij Het Toetsen Van Gezangen*, Woord en Wereld (Bedum: Woord en Wereld, 1998) and H. Vreugdenhil-Busstra, *Weet Wat Je Zingt! De 121 Liederen Van "Leusden": Een Verantwoorde Keuze?* (Bedum: Scholma, 2001). Also, Douma, *Afscheid*, 51–54.

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