

Is Truth Flexible?

The following article was published in "Information: A Newspaper for the Reformed Home," in the May 21, 1994 issue, by Pete deBoer under the heading, "TRUTH: FIRM FOUNDATION or FLEXIBLE OVER TIME." This article was written in the year immediately preceding the convening of CanRC General Synod 1995. One must remember that 7 more years had to pass before the establishment of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but two years had already gone by after the establishment of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Presbyterian Church of Korea and the Free Church of Scotland. Here follows the article:

By this time next year Synod 1995 will be around the corner. Delegates will be arranging flights; appeals and overtures will have been put into the mail.

It becomes necessary, then, to have a sincere look at where our churches are headed, as a federation.

The main issue that will undoubtedly dominate the agenda is church unity. Contact with the OPC, the fellowship established with Scotland and Korea since 1992, discussions with the RCUS, overtures from some churches regarding talks with the Free Reformed, the plans of the Reformed Alliance, and reports about the ICRC will all require the attention of the sixteen delegates from around Canada.

Church unity discussions are not restricted to our time. In 1952 some Dutch brothers living in Tasmania were being encouraged by a Rev. Schep to join in a united Reformed/Presbyterian church. They were unsure about the response they should give, although they were inclined to deny this request.

Having the desire to do right they asked for direction from their old consistory in Rotterdam. They received a lengthy answer with detailed quotes in Latin, English and Dutch. The conclusion of the letter, which was published in the Church News of Rotterdam, reads as follows: (translation PdB)

"The consistory, therefore, concludes that church institution, on the grounds of the Westminster Confession, by a right-minded reformed person is not possible. No wonder that Rev. Schep sees possibilities with HIS INTERPRETATION of the Church Order to regulate church life in agreement with the Westminster Confession. He reads our confession, so to speak, with Westminster glasses. If church life must be built in this way, 'in no time' you will have the synodical yoke under which not only you but also the coming generations will have to bow their neck. Not to say anything of the covenant view of the Westminster Confession. You would do well in Tasmania to bind yourself only to the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order. We agree with your request for advise considering the consequences for the future." The letter is signed by Rev. D.K. Wielenga, chairman and Elder C. Van Spronsen, clerk.

In the same line our Committee for Contact with the OPC wrote to the OPC Committee in 1972: "As to the divergencies in Church-polity, referred to in point 7 of the conclusions of Synod, the differences in church-government as reflected in your Form of Government and our Church Order are ultimately based on a difference in understanding of the relation between the local churches and the Church universal.

"The Church Order proceeds from the principle of the completeness and 'autonomy' of the local Churches, which in the unity of faith voluntarily enter into a federation of Churches.

"The Form of Government is based on the principle that the Church universal has precedence over the local Churches, which are actually parts of it. Form of Government chapter II 2,3."

Further in this letter we read: "The New Testament also teaches that whereas the apostles had authority over all the Churches, the authority of the elders was restricted to the flocks over which they were set as overseers, Acts 20:28.

"This principle does not allow us to see the broader assemblies as meetings of officebearers who in this capacity rule the Church in these assemblies. We consider it further in conflict with the principle expressed in Acts 20 that ministers belong to the presbyteries instead of to the local Churches, Chapter X,9 and that the presbytery instead of the session 'ordains, installs, removes and judges the ministers,' Chapter X,7 ... we read in Chapter XI,6 that 'deliverances, resolutions, overtures and other actions which are additional to the specific provisions of the constitution shall not be regarded binding unless they have been approved by the General Assembly and Presbyteries' This rule which makes the binding character of decisions depending on the approval of the majority is, in our opinion, not in agreement with the statement that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners.

"The history of the church has shown that the broadest assembly and the majority of broader assemblies may give approval of resolutions, etc., which are not in agreement with Holy Writ but are in conflict with it."

In a letter of April 1976 a response was received by our Committee from the OPC Committee. In connection with hierarchy it is mentioned that the OPC was established partly due to hierarchical actions of the PC in the USA. We are also informed that the practice of ministers belonging to the Presbytery and not to the local congregation was being reviewed.

It is good that the OPC recognizes the validity of the points made by our committee but at the same time it is sad that no changes are made in church government of the OPC. Since 1976 no changes have been made in the relationships of ministers and congregations either.

How is it possible to say that the differences between the Westminster Form of Government and the Church Order no longer present obstacles to further unity? Was the consistory in Rotterdam wrong? Was our committee in 1972 wrong? Or is truth flexible? PdB

Fast forward to 2018. Have the Presbyterian Churches in general or have the OPC in particular made any progress? Or have the CanRCs, by giving up the struggle for the scriptural doctrine that is maintained in the Three Forms of Unity, taken over the unreformed thinking that is prevalent in Presbyterian church government, that the Church universal has precedence over local churches?

Consider also the doctrines of the covenant and the church as found in the Westminster Standards, recognized as divergent doctrines, and of which there was much discussion in the CanRCs in the 1970's and 1980's. Is truth now flexible in the CanRCs?

J. Vantil