

# Secession in Abbotsford: Was it too *early*?

*By John Vantil*

Since the fall of man into sin, the history of the church has seen a continuous cycle of growth and decline, of reformation and deformation. With every new generation there comes a renewed struggle for faithfulness to God's Word.

With each reformation the question can be asked, was it the work of the Lord, or did man do this on his own? In the Great Reformation of the fifteen and sixteen hundreds it is taken for granted by all who claim to be "Reformed" that it was the work of the Lord that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others became His instruments to call His people out of the darkness of Roman Catholicism.

As descendants of the Liberation in 1944 from the synodical churches in the Netherlands, we would agree that in 1834 Hendrik de Cock was moved by the Lord to stand firm against the Classical Boards of the state church and become part of a secession in the town of Ulrum. However we would disagree with Abraham Kuyper who called this Secession "*a fruit plucked too soon*" (The Challenge of Church Union, edited by Prof. C. Van Dam, pages 25 and 51).

Similarly in 1944 we would also expect agreement on the fact that Professor Klaas Schilder, together with many others, had rightfully liberated from the synodical yoke to unscriptural doctrine and that this also was a work of the Lord. However we would disagree with those who eventually left the Liberated churches in the Netherlands in the 1960's and 1970's. These denied "*that the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished a new work of church reformation by the Liberation of 1944 and following years.*" (see *The 'Open Brief,'* in Canadian Reformed Magazine, by Rev. J.T. Van Popta, Vol. 17, No. 14, April 6, 1968, p.2).

However when we come to relatively recent history, we encounter serious disagreement. Many people have condemned the recent liberation in the Netherlands from unscriptural synodical decisions as an act of schism. Even General Synods 2007 and 2010 of the Canadian Reformed Churches have accused the members of these newly Restored churches of having unlawfully separated themselves from the church of Christ.

The secession in 2007, which occurred in Abbotsford, has also received criticism. In recent months this secession has received more scrutiny as a result of the recognition by the Restored churches in the Netherlands as a sister church. Remarks by Rev. Stam in a recent Clarion, and a more recent visit to Canada by Rev. S. de Marie of the Restored churches in the Netherlands, have served to put the secession in Abbotsford under a critical spotlight.

There appears to be some sympathy concerning the issues underlying the secession in Abbotsford, however questions still persist. Did they exhaust the appeal process? Were they not required to call God's people back to obedience to the Word of God by staying in the church, rather than, as stated by some, "leaving God's people and thereby declaring them false?" Did they not jump the gun? Was it too early?

## **The underlying issues**

Before we begin to answer the above questions it would be good to review the recent history that led to the secession in Abbotsford.

Beginning with the General Synod 1977 decision to recognize the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) as a "true church," the Canadian Reformed Churches had commenced on a course of deformation. At that time the General Synod still claimed that there were several unresolved confessional and church political "divergencies" which prevented the Canadian Reformed Churches and the OPC from becoming united. Nevertheless this recognition gave legitimacy to the idea that these "divergencies" do not contradict the true doctrine that is taught in the Scriptures. Once Synod 1977 had declared the OPC to be a "true church" the doctrine of the pluriformity of the church became acceptable in Canadian Reformed circles.

This downward course continued unchecked as appeals against the above decision of Synod 1977 were denied by subsequent General Synods. At Synod 1980 objections were raised against the "open table" in the OPC and the fact that the members of the OPC are not bound to their confessional standards (see *Acts*, Article 97, p.65).

In connection with these issues Synod 1986 considered that "the matter of fencing of the Lord's Supper is, indeed, a serious confessional divergency, which is a major issue of mutual concern" (*Acts*, Article 132, Consideration (b)). The following year, on two occasions, Classis Ontario South declared, for this same reason, that "the Tri-County Reformed Church has rightfully separated herself from the OPC" (see press release of Classis Ontario South published in the March 18, 1988 issue of *Clarion*, volume 37, number 6). Over time it became clear to many that the matters of the supervision of the Lord's supper and confessional membership were, indeed, serious concerns. Despite this, Synod 1989 did not take note of, nor draw the consequences of the above decision of Classis Ontario South concerning the relationship with the OPC. You will note that this Classis decision was never appealed.

The downward course of deformation intensified with the decisions of General Synod 1992. In connection with the OPC this Synod considered that the matters

of confessional membership and the supervision of the Lord's table "*still require resolution for the establishment of full ecclesiastical fellowship*" (*Acts*, Article 72, Recommendations C.5). However this Synod also made a number of other decisions that effectively contradicted this Recommendation. In connection with the OPC this Synod concluded that the doctrinal divergencies had been sufficiently discussed (Recommendations B). This Synod also changed the rules for sister church relationships into rules for ecclesiastical fellowship (*Acts*, Article 50). Most importantly, this Synod also decided, despite these matters still requiring resolution with the OPC, to enter into relationships of ecclesiastical fellowship with both the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) and the Free Church of Scotland (FCS) (*Acts*, Articles 111 and 128). These churches have the same deficiencies on the matters of confessional membership and the supervision of the Lord's table as the OPC.

Appeals to General Synods 1995 and 1998 regarding these new relationships of ecclesiastical fellowship were denied, although it was made clear that the practices regarding confessional membership and the supervision of the Lord's table in the PCK and the FCS were similar to those in the OPC. Synod 1998 produced a strengthened statement of agreement on these two matters (*Acts*, Article 130, Consideration C.4), however the OPC's complaint that the General Synods were judging the OPC using a different set of standards than used for the PCK and the FCS, had effect. General Synod 2001 finally compromised, fully capitulating to the OPC practices of non-confessional membership and the open Lord's Supper table, and establishing a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC (*Acts*, Article 45).

The importance of the unity of confession in the church of Christ has been known since the beginning of the history of the church. This can be seen in the following statement, "*Calvin wished unity of confession and of preaching in faithful subjection to the Word of God, of which people could not just think whatever they wanted.*" (*Calvijn*, Louis Praamsma, page 148, quoted in *Essays in Reformed Doctrine*, by Dr. J. Faber, p.216). In the dedication of his commentary on the letter to the Romans, Calvin writes "*less liberty will be taken in the principles of religion, in which God would have the minds of his people to be especially unanimous*" (*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, John Calvin, p.xxvii, quoted in *Essays in Reformed Doctrine*, by Dr. J. Faber, p.216-217). Is not the unity of confession among God's people just as important today? (See my editorial entitled "*An unscriptural commitment*" posted August 17, 2010 on [www.calltoreform.com](http://www.calltoreform.com)).

## **The appeal process**

In order to address the question as to whether or not the appeal process was properly followed, we first need to review the appeal process as prescribed in

Articles 30, 31 and 33 of the Church Order. Article 31 states that, "*If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.*" Article 33 states that, "*Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.*" Finally, the middle paragraph of Article 30 states that "*A major assembly shall deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common.*"

Throughout the history of the relationship with the OPC, numerous letters and appeals were sent by the churches and by individual members to the general synods. From 1968 through 2001, spanning a period of 33 years, warnings concerning this relationship were brought forward in the church orderly way. In the end all concerns and appeals were denied or ignored. The question needs to be asked – What did the churches and the church members do with the answers they received? Did they accept the decisions of the general synods or did they continue the path of appeal? Did they give up in frustration and acquiesce in these unscriptural decisions that were made? After all, "*Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.*"

Each member of the Canadian Reformed Churches can answer the above question for himself. What is important, however, for the situation in Abbotsford is that appeals had been made by other Canadian Reformed Churches, but, in all instances, were denied by the general synods.

The Canadian Reformed Church at Abbotsford did not share in the above history. You will not find evidence of continuous, ongoing appeals by this church in connection with the relationship with the OPC. Instead, the church at Abbotsford slept. It is to our shame that we must admit that as members of the church at Abbotsford we were so slow in seeing our duty!

It is only by God's grace that as members of the consistory and congregation of the Canadian Reformed Church in Abbotsford we could send an appeal of Article 45 of General Synod 2001 to General Synod 2004. The focus of this appeal is entirely on the two matters on which Synod 2001 had compromised – namely confessional membership and the supervision of the Lord's table in the OPC. The basis of this appeal is that the general synod decision in question is contrary to the Word of God or the Church Order (for the text of this appeal see [www.calltoreform.com](http://www.calltoreform.com), Librum, Correspondence with the Canadian Reformed Church at Abbotsford, Chronology of Correspondence I, see May 22, 2003 letter).

The subsequent denial of this appeal by General Synod 2004 (*Acts*, Article 86), without any Scriptural or Church Orderly basis, presented a problem for the consistory at Abbotsford. How was consistory to react to this decision? The consistory was at a crossroad. A decision that was made at Synod 2001 was appealed to Synod 2004, but the appeal was denied. The matter had been before two general synods. The full ecclesiastical way had been taken. As stated by Prof. K. Deddens and Rev. G. VanRongen, "*After one has gone the full 'ecclesiastical way' ... one has to either accept the latest decision as yet – which does not create any insurmountable difficulties whenever it is not a matter of conscience – or he has to 'liberate' himself from the binding decision*" (see their book *Decently and in Good Order*, page 63).

## **The highest authority**

Did the denial of Abbotsford's appeal by General Synod 2004 imply that the concerned members had to secede at this point in time? This may be true if the highest authority in the church was the general synod. It has been shown that the General Assembly is the highest authority in the OPC when we read earlier that "*the Tri-County Reformed Church has rightfully separated herself from the OPC*" rather than the local OPC at Burtonsville. However, under Reformed church polity it is the consistory that has the highest authority in the church, because it is the local church with its officebearers that has been instituted by Christ.

Therefore, as concerned members we were still required to address the consistory on this matter and this was done in our letter dated October 4, 2005. In this letter (to which we had also attached a more detailed "appeal") we pointed out in a summary that the response by General Synod 2004 was incorrect and inadequate for the following reasons:

- a) *Synod 2004 does not substantively interact with either the requests or the considerations underlying the requests which Consistory submitted to it.*
- b) *The return to the original agreement that was proposed by the Committee for Contact with the OPC to Synod 1998 occurred without Synods 2001 or 2004 interacting with the reasons Synod 1998 gave for amending this agreement.*
- c) *Synod 2001's deletion of the amendments, which were added by Synod 1998, caused the agreement to fall short of the substance of what we confess.*
- d) *Based on the OPC's official position "that the church is competent to determine as valid and credible a confession of the Christian faith for*

*communicant membership that is not also in accord with the church's confession" we cannot expect to find adequate supervision or unity of faith at the Lord's Supper in any OPC congregation.*

- e) *The agreement that was entered into by Synod 2001 is in conflict with Article 61 C.O. and Rules #1 and #4 of the Rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship as defined by Synod 1992 (for additional reference regarding the application of Article 61 C.O. see excerpt from Joh. Jansen's Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordering as translated by Rev. R.D. Anderson in the attached Appendix C).*
- f) *The implicit acceptance of an interview process as a basis for admission of guests to the Lord's Supper results in the practice of an open Lord's Supper table.*
- g) *The expression of Synod's objective that "the OPC should become more consistent in how it supervises the Lord's Table" is undermined by the extension of a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the OPC.*
- h) *Synod 2004 inappropriately defends a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the OPC by referring to a consideration of Synod 1995 that is inconsistent with the decisions of both Synods 1995 and 1998.*
- i) *Synod 2004's failure to specifically interact with all of the Considerations raised by the Church at Abbotsford, or to specifically answer the Requests made by the Church at Abbotsford, is an effective denial of the right of appeal the Church of Abbotsford has under Article 31 C.O.*

In February 2006 the consistory of the Canadian Reformed Church at Abbotsford replied in writing to the concerned members that it accepts the 2004 Synod decisions. However the consistory does not explain what was incorrect or unscriptural in the original appeal it had previously taken over and sent to Synod 2004. Is this not an injustice when consistory appeals to Synod 2004 on the basis of Scripture and the Church Order, and then refuses to explain on the basis of Scripture and the Church Order how this same appeal is now incorrect? Is not this refusal a serious breach of it's pastoral duty (see Articles 22 and 27 C.O.)?

In the period from March 2006 through March 2007 numerous letters were sent by the concerned members to the consistory, beseeching it to reconsider its decision. However this did not occur. In its final response dated May 31, 2007 the consistory indicated that "*we consider the matter finished.*" As we stated earlier, Article 33 of the Church Order states that, "*Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.*"

The concerned members had no other appeal process to follow. As stated previously, appeals relating to these matters had been before many general synods, and there were no new grounds for further appeals to general synods. The only appeal left to make was to the local consistory, as the highest authority in the church of Christ. When, at the end of a long series of letters, which culminated in the consistory response of May 31, 2007 that "*we consider the matter finished,*" it became clear that the appeal process was exhausted.

### **Too early?**

In our discussion of "the underlying issues" we noted that the membership of the Canadian Reformed Churches had officially accepted deviation from the Reformed confessions when the decisions of General Synod 1992 to extend relationships of ecclesiastical fellowship to the FCS and the PCK were accepted by the consistories as settled and binding. These deviations became more evident to concerned members in Abbotsford after Synod 2001 when a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship was extended to the OPC.

Once the consistory of the Canadian Reformed Church at Abbotsford had accepted this decision, and all efforts made to beseech the consistory to reconsider its decision had been rejected, the concerned members had to make one of two choices. They could have chosen to accept the consistory's decision, compromise on the general synod decisions that conflict with the Word of God and wait for others to share their insight. Alternatively they could be obedient to the Word of God and continue the church of Christ in Abbotsford by seceding from the existing institute. Simply put, they had to bend or break.

However, further waiting was not permitted. In the words of Professor Greijdanus, "*The apostle Paul, for instance, did not write to the Galatians that they should continue to entrust themselves, for the time being, to the false teachers and their preaching, until he himself could come to them and straighten everything out again. Without any attempt to mollify them, without any compromise or postponement he said, as sharply as possible, 'But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one which you received, let him be accursed,' Galatians 1:8. When? Later? In a little while? After this or that? May or should matters continue for the time being? No, now, immediately. 'As we have said before, so now I say again, If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed,' Galatians 1:9. The apostle knows nothing of temporarily permitting and acquiescing in what conflicts with the Word of God, until others too will share your insight, and will admit, that this or that preaching, that this or that synodical decision, conflicts with the gospel of God, the Holy Scriptures. Everyone has his own responsibility, which cannot be passed off to others. Everyone must judge for himself, must decide now, when something does not*

*conform to God's Word, to reject it and to break with it, not continuing with others in the wrong. No synod, no church federation affords you any excuse. People are not the lords of the church. Christ is its absolute owner and commander. 'Oh, that today you would hearken to His voice! Harden not your hearts,' Psalm 95:7, 8' (Bound Yet Free, Readings in Reformed Church Polity, edited by Dr. J. De Jong, pages 63-64).*

As stated above, the consciences of the concerned members were at stake. Our covenantal obligation is to be obedient to Christ and to His Word. Even though this would come at the cost of much struggle and anguish of heart, obedience to Christ demanded that the concerned members secede and call their fellow church members back to obedience to God's Word.

Not everyone is convinced of what the Lord requires of us at the same time. Time is needed to give opportunity for discussion. Every person must consider and judge the above matters for himself. We cannot judge people. Only the Lord can judge the hearts of people (see Deuteronomy 29:29). We do know what God's Word says. We are called to be faithful in our words and in our deeds.

We also confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession "... *it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church ...*" On the basis of this statement in the confession some have charged that the act of secession means that we no longer consider those we have seceded from to be true Christians.

However this is not what the confession means, for that would put the confession in conflict with Deuteronomy 29:29. We do not judge the hearts of those we had to leave behind, but we separate from a false institute (see Revelation 18:4). It is the false institute that has permitted heretical teachings in the church, corrupted the use of the sacraments and church discipline, and called those who are faithful "schismatic." How can we, in all sincerity, continue to witness for the truth, while at the same time participate in the consequences of these unscriptural decisions? Would this not be hypocrisy?

At the time that Abbotsford had accepted the general synod decisions extending ecclesiastical fellowship to the FSC and the PCK as settled and binding, we had effectively involved ourselves in compromise on the matters of confessional membership and the supervision of the Lord's supper. According to Rev. P.K.A. de Boer the Three Forms of Unity were "*no longer fully functional as forms for unity*" ("*What is happening to the Three Forms of Unity in the Canadian Churches,*" Reformed Polemics, Vol. 8, No. 1, p.9). When the Lord by His grace, made this clear to us how could we continue to participate in these decisions with integrity?



Please note that another appeal relating to the decision of Synod 2001 to extend a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship to the OPC was sent from a Canadian Reformed Church to Synod 2010. This appeal was declared "*inadmissible on the basis of Article 33 of the Church Order*" (see *Acts*, Synod 2010, Article 27). Does this response not indicate that Synod itself says that the Church Orderly process is finished? Does not Synod itself say that this process was already completed at Synod 2004 (see Consideration 3.1 of this same Article 27)?

Were we too early? Not based on the above evidence. These matters had been appealed nine years prior to Abbotsford's appeal in 2004. They continued to be appealed for six years thereafter. In all this we continued to limp along with two different opinions. For years we had compromised on the true doctrine.

Yes, the true doctrine! For the authority of God's Word is at stake. Do we not become enslaved to sin and to Satan without sound doctrine? Christ has ransomed us and as His redeemed people we are required to be obedient to Him. As Professor J. Van Vliet states in his article "Teaching Sound Doctrine as Redeemed Servants," "*For in this way, the Son who redeemed us, the Spirit who sanctifies us, and the Father who created us, the one true and Triune God receives all the honour and the glory.*" (*Clarion*, Vol. 59, No. 23, p.584).

Were we too early? Or could we perhaps be too late? For "*if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment ....*" "*So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.'* But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (Hebrews 10:26,27,35-39)."

As we confess concerning the first commandment, we would "*forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against his will*" (Answer 94 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Again, God's Word! Are not all members of the Canadian Reformed Churches responsible for ensuring that the General Synod decisions are in accordance with the Word of God and the Church Order?

Our hope and prayer is that by the grace of God many more will return to the true doctrine, the norm of God's Word, and stand firm. We pray that many more will realize the destructive effect of unresolved divergencies, non-confessional membership and an open Lord's supper on the unity of faith that our Lord requires in His church (John 4:24 and I Corinthians 11:19-20). Our help is in Him alone. To Him be all honour and glory!