

# From Dort to Today

## A History of the Reformed Faith

### The Christian Reformed Church

(19)

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The Christian Reformed Church, as is always true of the Church of God on earth, was beset with doctrinal controversies. That this is always true need not surprise us, for the devil knows very well that to rob the Church of her heritage of the truth is to destroy the Church. In this attempt he never grows weary.

There are three of these doctrinal controversies which particularly are important, two of which shall occupy us in this article. The third is the controversy concerning common grace which led to the establishment of our own Protestant Reformed Churches.

The first controversy was concerning premillennialism.

The history is briefly this.

Shortly after World War I, a certain Rev. H. Bultema wrote a book entitled *Maranatha* in which he defended the well-known view of the dispensationalists. This view denies the unity of the Church in the Old and New Dispensations and teaches instead that a distinction must be made between God's dealing with the Jews and with the Gentiles. The Jews and Gentiles are never united into one Church, but the Jews are treated separately and differently from the Church composed of the Gentiles. The Jews always remain God's special covenant people. Christ is the *King* of the Jews, but not of the Church, the Gentiles. Of the Church, this theory teaches, Christ is only the *Head*.

Although there was some question on the Synod as to whether Bultema taught all the premillennial views, nevertheless, to make a distinction between the Jews and Gentiles in this fashion is to open the door for all premillennial views: a thousand year reign of Christ with the Jews in Palestine, a rapture, etc.

These views were discussed and condemned by the Synod in 1918 and 1920. A committee was appointed to urge the First Church of Muskegon, of which Bultema was the pastor, to take action against their minister. This the consistory refused to do, even when Bultema refused to retract his views; and the result was that the congregation was put outside the denomination and Bultema was removed from office.

This particular doctrinal controversy does not concern us too much. It is a question how much premillennialism lingers on in the Christian Reformed Church even today. But the fact is that this error was not of a kind to have any effect upon our own denomination.

There is only one point worth our notice in this connection.

That point is that Bultema was condemned on the grounds that his views were contrary to the Confessions; that he had failed to present his objections to the Confessions in the proper way, i.e., by way of protest to Consistory, Classis and Synod; that therefore he had violated his promise which he made when he signed the Formula of Subscription, and had made himself worthy of deposition. The relevant part of the Formula of Subscription reads: "And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrine (i.e., the doctrine of the Confessions, H.H.) should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first

revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis and Synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis and Synod, under penalty in case of refusal to be, by that very fact, suspended from our office.”

The Synod clearly saw that Bultema’s views were in violation of the Confessions, and certainly followed correct procedure.

But the point that is worth noticing is that this strong and correct position of the Christian Reformed Church has been forgotten ever since that day. If only the Christian Reformed Church would maintain this same position today how different things would be in that denomination.

Today there are ministers, professors in the seminary and missionaries who, in public writings openly criticize the Confessions.

One example of this will suffice. In the March issue of the *Reformed Journal*, Rev. Harry R. Boer is writing on the subject “The Doctrine of Reprobation and the Preaching of the Gospel.” In this article Rev. Boer as much as says that he does not believe the truth concerning reprobation. But this need not concern us here except to notice that this truth is nevertheless historically Reformed. What is important as far as our discussion is concerned, is the fact that he is discussing the doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons of Dort. He finds that the view of reprobation expounded in the Canons is ambiguous, vague, uncertain and contradictory when considered in the light of other teachings of the same Canons, particularly the teaching concerning the preaching of the gospel. He concludes in fact, that this treatment of reprobation is so ambiguous that he finds it impossible to teach or to preach this truth.

Anyone reading his article and knowing the teachings of the Canons will be able to see clearly that he is forcing interpretations of the Canons that are not there; that he is creating contradiction where none exist; and that he fails utterly in proving his contention. But even this is not my point. What concerns me is that fact that he openly criticizes our Confessions, publicly expresses disagreement with them, seemingly embraces the view of the Arminians expressly condemned in the Canons; and does all this without going the church political way of protest through Consistory, Classis and Synod. He breaks his promise that he made when he signed the Formula of Subscription. And absolutely nothing is done about it. The Formula of Subscription clearly states that he should be, by the very fact of his opposition to the Confessions, deposed from office. But Boer continues to teach and to preach.

The Christian Reformed Church has walked a long way since 1920.

The second doctrinal controversy involved a professor in the seminary.

Dr. Janssen, professor of the Old Testament, was teaching views which aroused suspicions as to his orthodoxy among some members of the Board of Trustees. We need not follow the history of the case; we pause only to notice that his views were condemned by the Synod in 1922 and Dr. Janssen was relieved of his position in the seminary.

What does interest us are the views of which he was put out. Prof. Janssen questioned the infallibility and therefore also the authority of Scripture. As a result of this position, he also cause doubt on some of the miracles, suggesting that they could perhaps be explained by natural causes, and he brought into doubt the literal interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis.

Although these views were condemned, they were evidently more deeply rooted in the Church than was first realized, for in 1924 the Synod had more than a dozen protests directed against it which supported the views of Janssen, or at least, expressed dissatisfaction with Synod’s decisions.

The point is now that it is obvious that the Christian Reformed Church is no longer willing to condemn these same views which are currently being taught. Recently the doctrine of

infallibility came under attack and was discussed on the Synod. Besides, in Calvin College, in the Christian High Schools and Grade Schools the same errors are being openly taught for which Janssen was put out. Once again the literal meaning of the first three chapters of Genesis is being questioned; miracles are being explained through natural causes; the authority of Scripture is being undermined, and teachers are claiming to find errors in God's Word. But today nothing is done about it. The strength to withstand false doctrine is gone in the Christian Reformed Church.

In his book "The Christian Reformed Tradition" Rev. D.H. Kromminga writes by way of summary concerning these doctrinal disputes: "What strikes one in these heresy trials is the fact that every one found a settlement in a relatively short time without seriously disrupting the Church." (p. 147) While this may, from a certain point of view, be true, these same evils are seriously disrupting the Church today in that they are no longer condemned.

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