

How reformed is it?

(Submitted on behalf of the Committee on Reformed Witness)

The Christian Reformed Church in North America was formed in 1890. This body, being largely of Dutch immigrant stock, had the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort as doctrinal standards subordinate to Scripture. In 1924 two ministers, Rev. H. Hoeksema and Rev. H. Danhof, differed from the position taken by the Synod of their church on the subject of "common grace". This led to the formation of a separate denomination called the Protestant Reformed Churches of America.

While this body may be little known in the British Isles, in recent times it has been involved in two developments. One is the formation of Covenant Reformed Fellowship in Ballymena which is pastored by a Protestant Reformed Churches minister. The other is the formation of the British Reformed Fellowship (B.R.F.) which exists more or less to advance the doctrinal views of the Protestant Reformed Churches by way of publications, meetings and conferences.

The B.R.F. claims to represent an uncompromising stand for the Reformed Faith and therefore has an understandable appeal to Reformed Christians wearied with the confused muddle of the times. The B.R.F. claims to uphold the doctrines of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms in a manner which existing Reformed churches apparently are regarded as failing to do.

As a committee, we are concerned that the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, largely expressed by the B.R.F., is seriously at variance with the Westminster Standards.

We now give some points of divergence :

1. The Covenant

The Covenant of Grace is seen by Hoeksema and his followers solely as God's unconditional establishment of a living bond of friendship through Christ with His elect. Indeed, the Covenant is this relationship according to Hoeksema and he criticised the Westminster Confession of Faith on this very point (H. Hoeksema, "The Covenant, God's Tabernacle with Men," p.2).

The Westminster Confession sees the Covenant as a means whereby God establishes a loving bond with men, not the relationship itself. "God hath been pleased to express by way of Covenant" (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1). And whilst, in the Covenant, God has undertaken unconditionally to establish in Christ the bond of fellowship with the elect, the means by which He does so is the proclamation of a conditional promise to all, albeit only the elect are enabled to fulfil the condition of faith in Christ (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3. See also Calvin's commentary on Genesis 17:7).

In the first two chapters of Genesis, the Covenant name Jehovah (LORD in many translations) is only used when God begins to speak to Adam and to make requirements of him concerning the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In Psalm 19 also, the Covenant name is only used when special revelation (Scripture) comes in view. Hence, the Covenant is not a relationship but the means, through special revelation, which results in or sustains the relationship of friendship with God.

This erroneous starting point leads to further departure from the orthodoxy of the Westminster Confession further down the line.

2. Saving Faith

Whereas the Larger Catechism (Q. 32) teaches that in the Covenant God "freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by Him, and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in Him", the Protestant Reformed Churches deny the concept of a conditional promise, insisting that the promises are only "for the elect". This means that there are no promises to any non-Christian, since no one can know they are one of the elect prior to their conversion.

This, in turn, means that saving faith in its initial exercise can no longer be defined as entailing "embracing the promises of God" (Westminster Confession of Faith 14.2). Once more the Protestant Reformed Churches are at variance with the Westminster Standards and, above all, with the Word of God (Acts 2 : 38-39; Heb. 11 : 13, 33).

3. Common Grace

The Protestant Reformed Churches deny that God ever shows, even in this life, love, kindness, favour or mercy to any but the elect. They acknowledge that the non-elect receive food, rain and sunshine, health and a variety of abilities and skills at the hand of God, but they deny that they are expressions of God's benevolence or kindness, and every text which teaches that they are is battered out of shape to fit in with this erroneous presupposition.

By contrast, the Lord Jesus taught that God "does good" (Matt. 5:43-48) and is "kind" (Luke 6:35) in the bestowal of His gifts and this is often called "common grace". The Westminster Confession of Faith also refers to "common operations of the Spirit" (10.4) because God restrains sin even in the non-elect and also at times convinces them of their sin, but without renewing the heart and will. It is the genuineness of God's blessings to the sinner that renders him so guilty when he abuses them (Rom. 2:4-5).

The Protestant Reformed Churches' insistence that God never shows loving kindness to the non-elect in the present life has serious repercussions.

(a) It would mean God commands us, in this world, to love those to whom He does not show any love. This is incompatible with God's holy character, expressed in His law for man. We are to love our neighbour, not just our elect neighbour, (we don't know who they are anyway), to be like our Father in Heaven (Matt. 5:45 & 48).

(b) The Lord Jesus Christ was (and is) God and man. The Protestant Reformed Churches' position could mean that Christ, as God, showed love only to the elect, but as man showed love to His neighbour generally while on earth. This would produce a disharmony between the two natures in the person of Christ and would be heresy. The alternative is to say that Christ never showed love to the non-elect and thus did not love His non-elect neighbour, which is to deny that He was "made under the Law, and did perfectly fulfil it". (Westminster Confession of Faith 8.4).

Is God bound to the moral law? Surely He can't be bound to the same obligations which He sovereignly brings upon us?

4. The Free Offer of the Gospel

Along with the Protestant Reformed Churches' denial of common grace comes the denial of the free offer of the Gospel. They recognise that the terms "offer" and "free offer" appear in the Westminster Confession (8.3) and the Catechisms (Larger : Q. 32, 63, 68; Shorter : Q. 31 and 86), but they would have us believe that the Westminster Assembly meant no more than a bare declaration of the facts of the cross and a command to repent.

Anyone wishing to know what was understood by these terms at the time of the Westminster Assembly should read the "Sum of Saving Knowledge", often printed with the Westminster Confession, and especially the section on "Warrants to believe", where there are references to God's promises and offers, and to the "sweet invitation of God", "the loving requests of God and Christ", etc. This document was produced by David Dickson and James Durham shortly after the Westminster Assembly and claims to be based on the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, a claim which appears to have gone unchallenged.

As Covenanters, the view of the early ministers of our church is of interest. Those familiar with the extant sermons of Cameron or Renwick will be well aware that, strong Calvinists as they were, they solemnly pleaded with men to repent of their sins and come to Christ, believing that as they did so they acted as "ambassadors for Christ", expressing His loving kindness to their hearers (Isaiah 55 : 1-7; Ezekiel 18 : 31-32 & 33 : 11; Luke 19 : 41-42; Matt. 23 : 37; 2. Cor. 5 : 19-20).

5. Justification

Some Protestant Reformed Churches' writers assert that the elect are justified from eternity. Faith becomes merely the means of realizing we are justified. Even when they do not say this, they use the terms "elect" and "righteous" somewhat interchangeably which the Scriptures do not. In no sense are the elect righteous before being born-again of the Holy Spirit. Only then are they justified and only then does sanctification begin. So the Westminster Confession deliberately distinguished between God's decree to justify the elect which is from eternity and the actual bestowal of the blessing of justification which takes place in time and follows effectual calling (Westminster Confession of Faith 11.4). This is the teaching of Scripture (Rom. 8 : 30; 1 Cor. 6 : 11; Eph. 2 : 5).

The P.R.C. don't disagree here.

6. Conclusions

The Protestant Reformed Churches also differ from the Westminster Confession on matters of worship and the doctrine of the civil magistrate, as well as divorce and remarriage and the identity of the Man of Sin, but it is on the points above that the B.R.F. seem most inclined to align themselves with the Protestant Reformed Churches.

If the British Reformed Fellowship is to have credibility as to its claim to uphold the Biblical teaching of the Westminster Standards, it will need to sever its special link with the Protestant Reformed Churches of America and its distinctive doctrines which are neither Protestant nor Reformed. That there is need for a robust declaration of Biblical Calvinistic doctrine is by no means to be denied. The truth of God's sovereignty in election and predestination or of Christ's definite atonement specifically and only for the elect of God, and other important doctrines need vigorous assertion. Nevertheless, the linking of these Biblical truths with the doctrinal aberrations of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America will only sow further confusion.

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5 : 21).