

What I learned from my Dutch Reformed brethren.

It was my privilege to serve as a pastor for nearly two decades with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (or RCNZ). And it was during this time that they adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) as one of the doctrinal standards of their Churches having authority equal to that of the Three Forms of Unity. And what has impressed me more and more over the years is not only the fact that these Dutch immigrants did this rather remarkable thing, but also showed quite clearly by their actions the integrity of that adoption.

It was not long after the WCF was adopted that one of the pastors who came from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands lodged what they called a gravamen against Chapter 21:7-8 of the WCF. The pastor who brought that gravamen to his Session, then Presbytery and finally Synod, was a man of integrity. He did not start publicly preaching or teaching ‘his’ view of the Lord’s Day/Sabbath. No, he had too much respect for the integrity of Confessional Subscription. What he wanted was either the removal of 21:7-8, or a newly written replacement for that section of the WCF. So he sought it by refraining from publicly teaching or writing anything contrary to the Church’s adopted Confessional Standards, while working within the assemblies of the elders of the Churches to effect a change that he could agree with. I was opposed to his gravamen, but I respected very much the way that he dealt with this matter. We remained good friends during the time when this was adjudicated—and also after he left New Zealand to serve in a different Confessional context in Australia.

One of the things that left a deep impression on me was the fact that even though this was an issue that could have become a serious source of conflict, it did not. The reason was that an orderly course had been followed. And when the Synod (or what I would call the broadest assembly of the elders of the RCNZ) determined that the churches wished to uphold WCF 21:7-8, my friend did not even want to publicly teach or preach what was contrary to this. He sought, instead, a place in a church that had not adopted the WCF as the RCNZ had. And it is my conviction that we Presbyterians would profit by learning from this example.

In our earlier history, as I understand it, we Presbyterians had a similar concept and conviction. Let me give two examples: (1) The original text of the WCF 25:6 said *“There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.”* I hope that everyone who reads this will understand that I am in complete agreement with the first part of this section of the WCF. But I am also thankful that the part which I have underlined, above, has been changed. I certainly believe that what the Scriptures say about the Antichrist has a valid application to the false claims of the Papacy. I also believe what II Thessalonians says about *“the man of sin [or lawlessness]”* can be applied—by the principle of analogy—against the Papacy. But I do not believe (as the authors of the WCF did) that the Papacy is what the apostles Paul and John specifically intended us to understand their words to mean. I am therefore in complete agreement with the deletion of the underlined words in the OPC and PCA version. (2) The original text of WCF 25:4b said *“The man may not marry any of his wife’s kindred, nearer in blood than he may of his own: not the woman her husband’s kindred, nearer in blood than of her own.”* It is my recollection that Professor John Murray defended this original section of the WCF. But my interest here is to point out that in earlier times Presbyterians saw it as important to either agree with their Confession or change it so that it says in plain, understandable words, what the church actually believes. When they no longer held this view it too was deleted. And it is this integrity that I wish we could recover.

I have noted several instances, lately, in which the great Herman Bavinck has been cited in support of the assertion that no creed has as yet made six-day creation a confessional doctrine. And it is true that Dr. Bavinck not only admitted that historically *“Christian theology, with only a few exceptions, continued to*

What I learned from my Dutch Reformed brethren.

hold onto the literal historical view of the creation story” but then went on to say “*not a single confession made a fixed pronouncement about the six-day continuum...*” I have the highest respect for Herman Bavinck and am thankful, at last, to have my hands on his great work of Dogmatics in English. But even great men make mistakes. And the fact is that on this he was not correct. The Westminster Assembly of Divines *did* make a fixed pronouncement about the six-day continuum. They said in the WCF, and again in both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, that God—by the word of his power—created “*all things visible and invisible, in the space of six days.*” And that they intended this to mean what our children take it to mean when they learn the shorter catechism, has been clearly demonstrated by Dr. David Hall.

I (and other six-day creation people) have been accused of wanting to excommunicate Hodge, Warfield and Machen because of their willingness to tolerate views such as the day-age view. This is a false charge. Did Luther and Calvin want to excommunicate Augustine because they found error in his teaching? Wasn't the Reformation itself a liberation from blind obedience to false tradition—even if that false tradition was sometimes embraced by truly great men? I therefore refuse to be silenced by this sort of tyranny, and insist on my right to say that a serious mistake was made in the way this issue was handled by some truly great men. I think it should have been handled in the same way the two items cited above [(1) and (2)] were handled. Men who did not hold to the six-day view (so clearly expressed in the three Westminster Standards) should have been required to refrain from public teaching or preaching their different views unless and until those sections of the WCF and Catechisms were either removed or rewritten. I say this because I think it is a serious failure on the part of the eldership of the church to teach our children one thing (in the catechism) while the preacher teaches another thing. Had this restraint been required those who do not agree with six-day creation would have seen it as their duty to remain silent (in public utterance and writing on the subject) while they made diligent study in order (in private) to formulate what they had come to believe to be the truth in order to bring it before their Session, Presbytery and General Assembly, seeking a change in the Westminster Standards. Had this been done it is possible that the church would have finally been persuaded that one or another of the various views was correct. Then the doctrinal standards could have been changed to clearly state the other view. Or at least it might have resulted in the church simply removing the sections of the WCF and Catechisms that say God created the world “in the space of six-days.” As it is at present we have, in effect, taken on a new method of Confessional revision. We no longer insist that our Confession and Catechisms unambiguously state what we as a church unitedly believe, so that the words of our confession themselves are subordinately authoritative (meaning that while they can be changed when appropriate, as scripture cannot, they nevertheless must be adhered to unless changed by due process). Now the doctrinal authority seems more and more to reside in whatever the majority is willing to allow, rather than in the words of the Confessions and Catechisms taken according to their intended and long-received meaning. I think the brethren who came brought the Dutch Reformed heritage to New Zealand exhibited something better than ‘our way’ of dealing with our Subordinate Standards, and we would do well to learn from their example.