

REPORT 47

SYNODICAL DECISIONS AND THE CONFESSIONS

(Art. 46)

The Synod of 1973 appointed this committee on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions with the mandate "to study the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions.

“Grounds:

- a. From time to time the church does in fact confess the faith by official declarations in interpretation and application of the confessions.
- b. There is no clear understanding as to how these fit into our confessional structure.
- c. There is need for compiling, publishing, and distributing such declarations in a usable form” (Acts of Synod, 1973, pp. 65-66).

I. ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF MANDATE

The mandate to the committee arose out of a proposal from synod’s study committee on a New Confession. The Synod of 1972 expressed as its judgment “that the Christian Reformed Church is not ready at this time to augment its confession” (Acts of Synod, 1972, p. 31). The study committee on a “new confession” was continued, however, “so that it may complete its mandate, and that it may promote further study of our confessional task among the churches” (Acts, 1972, p. 31). In its report to synod in 1973 the New Confession Committee suggested “that synod, considering the fact that from time to time it confesses the faith by official declarations in interpretation and application of these confessions

1. commission a study of the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and practical themes,
2. make provision for the better use of its significant pronouncements by arranging for their compilation, publication, and distribution in a convenient form” (Acts of Synod, 1973, p. 498).

This suggestion led to synod’s mandate as cited above.

The present committee submitted a progress report to the Synod of 1974 (pp. 498ff.) with three recommendations. Synod adopted the following four recommendations:

- “1. That synod approve the work of the committee done thus far.
2. That synod instruct the committee to complete its study of ‘the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters and their relation to the confessions.’

Ground: While the study has been initiated, more study is necessary to provide a clear statement as to how synodical decisions fit into our confessional structure.

3. That synod authorize the committee to complete the compilation of materials for a book to contain pertinent synodical decisions as well as a clear statement as to how synodical decisions fit into our confessional structure.

Grounds:

- a. Such a book will be useful for office bearers, leaders, synodical and classical study committees, and/or advisory committees. It will be especially useful when the time element makes detailed research impossible.

b. Such a book will be helpful for interested church members who do not have access to full reports but have an interest in becoming informed. This would apply in a special way to consistory members facing problems and making decisions.

c. Such a book will be helpful for anyone outside of our immediate communion who is interested in learning about the stands and decisions of the Christian Reformed Church.

4. That synod instruct the committee to present specific proposals as to the format, distribution, and costs for publication of such a book" (Acts of Synod, 1974, pp. 40-41).

The committee understands synod's mandate of 1973 as amplified in 1974 to involve two basic matters:

1. To compile materials for a book to contain pertinent synodical decisions on doctrinal and ethical matters together with specific proposals as to the format, distribution, and costs for publication of such a book.

2. To present a clear statement as to how such synodical decisions are related to the confessions, how they fit into our confessional structure. A ground for this part of the mandate is that "from time to time the church does in fact confess the faith by official declarations in interpretation and application of the confessions."

We shall first of all consider the "use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions."

II. SYNODICAL PRONOUNCEMENTS AND THE CONFESSIONS

A. *Scripture and Confession*

The confessions are subordinate to Scripture. The Christian Reformed Church confesses "its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word" (Church Order, Art. 1). In the Belgic Confession the church confesses the Holy Scriptures "as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them" (Art. V). Scripture alone is acknowledged as the "infallible rule" (Art. VII). Thus the confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort—are subordinate to Scripture and are embraced as "a true interpretation of this Word." Hence, the confessions function as "forms of unity" in which the church confesses its faith. All office-bearers are required to "signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Form of Subscription" (Church Order, Art. 5). Furthermore, "members by baptism shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper upon a public profession of Christ according to the Reformed creeds, with the use of the prescribed form" (Church Order, Art. 59a). The criteria for membership of persons coming from other denominations are the same (Art. 59c).

The confessions of the Christian Reformed Church are, of course, held in common with many other Reformed churches throughout the world. The creeds or confessions of the Reformed churches are first of all *confessions* in which the church gives expression to its faith in response to God who revealed himself in his Word. In the confessions the church also presents a *public testimony* to the world concerning her Christian faith. Within its own communion the confessions function as *forms of unity* in which the common faith of the members of the church is ex-

pressed. The confessions also serve as *instruments for the instruction* of the youth in the church in order, by God's grace, to bring them to confess this faith also. As forms of unity the confessions also serve a *juridical function* in guarding the purity of the church in doctrine and life. The confessions also serve a *missionary purpose* as instruments for witnessing to the world with the full Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although the confessions are subordinate to the Scriptures, they have a strategic and varied role in the life of the Christian Reformed Church and in the life of those other Reformed churches throughout the world holding the same confession.

B. Synodical Pronouncements

Synodical decisions are as varied as the life of the church. Synod, by majority vote, elects officers, appoints committees, considers protests and appeals, decides various issues on its agenda and adopts a budget. The mandate to this committee focuses attention primarily on "synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters" and requests "a clear statement as to how synodical decisions fit into our confessional structure." This limitation to a specific type of synodical decision is related to synod's desire that pertinent decisions of this type be compiled for publication in a book. And one of the grounds for that desire to make these pronouncements more readily accessible is that "from time to time the church does in fact confess the faith by official declarations in interpretation and application of the confessions."

We begin by observing that, according to the Church Order, synodical decisions, as well as those of consistories and classes, "shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Art. 29). It is somewhat surprising that no mention is made of the confessions in this article. We have noted above that Article 1 of the Church Order states that the Christian Reformed Church confesses "its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word." The subordination of synodical decisions to the confessions is indicated in the "Rules for Synodical Procedure" where it is stated that a main motion is not acceptable "if it conflicts with the Church Order or is contrary to Scripture as interpreted in our Forms of Unity" (1972 edition, p. 14, B,2,a). Hence we conclude that as the confessions are subordinate to the Word, so in a similar way synodical decisions are subordinate to the confessions.

Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters fall into several categories. Although there may be some additional types, at least the following main categories may be distinguished: 1. some doctrinal and ethical pronouncements of synod are set forth as an interpretation of the confessions; 2. some of these pronouncements expand upon or augment the doctrinal or ethical matters dealt with in the creeds; 3. some pronouncements deal with issues not specifically referred to in the confessions; 4. some synodical decisions are adjudicatory decisions relating to disciplinary matters or to protests or appeals; 5. some synodical decisions, at times relating to one of the above categories, are set forth in the form of a testimony or letter; 6. some synodical decisions involve

guidelines for further study or action; and 7. some synodical decisions involve pastoral advice. Examples of each of these general categories are readily identifiable in the compilation of pertinent doctrinal and ethical pronouncements prepared by this committee for synod's scrutiny.

While all of these varied pronouncements by synod over the years are, as synodical pronouncements, clothed with "synodical authority," they serve that precise use and function for which they were specifically designed by synod. It is extremely difficult to generalize on this matter. All synodical decisions "shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Art. 29). But there is an obvious difference between the use and function of a pronouncement as interpretation of the confessions and a decision involving "guidelines" or "pastoral advice." It is the wording of synod's decision which usually indicates the precise character of its decision, and this wording of the decision determines its use and function.

No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions. One of the clearest synodical statements on this matter was made in 1926, when the 1881 decisions concerning the Lord's Day were reaffirmed and applied in a concrete case. The following part of the 1926 decision expresses synod's view of the relation of such decisions to the confessions:

"The six points of 1881 are to be regarded, even as the three points of 1924, as an interpretation of our Confession. First, the Synod of 1881 did not add a new confession to the Forms of Unity, but accepted the six points as an interpretation of the confessional writings, in so far as they express the Reformed position relative to the fourth commandment. Secondly, such an interpretation given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group. Thirdly, one cannot place one's personal interpretation of the Confessions or a part thereof above the official interpretation of synod. That would make void the significance and power of the Forms of Unity" (Acts of Synod, 1926, pp. 191-192).

A few of synod's pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters serve a unique function. When a minister from another denomination is considered for call by a consistory of a Christian Reformed congregation, certain synodical decisions are given special consideration.* While the minister under consideration must be willing to sign the Form of Subscription according to Article 5 of the Church Order, he must also "promise to abide by" certain doctrinal and ethical "deliverances in the exercise of his ministerial office in the Christian Reformed Church" (Cf. Acts of Synod, 1963, pp. 21-24). The specific deliverances referred to are the following:

a. The position of the Christian Reformed Church, taken in 1867 and 1881, regarding oath-bound societies.

b. The doctrinal deliverances on common grace of 1924 and 1959-1961.

c. The resolutions of 1928 and 1951 relating to worldly amusements" (Acts of Synod, 1963, p. 24).

It is obvious that these particular synodical pronouncements of a doctrinal and ethical nature serve a unique function. However, this use does not elevate them to the status of the confessions. The office-bearer is required to subscribe to the confessions. And a minister coming from

* Synod of 1974 deleted this requirement. (Art. 27, p. 21).

another denomination "must give his promise to abide by these deliverances in the exercise of his ministerial office" to be considered eligible for a call in the Christian Reformed Church.

One of the doctrinal pronouncements mentioned above concerns the three points on common grace of 1924. When the Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America requested that these three points be set aside and considered "as without further binding force," the official response of the Synod of 1960 in a letter was the following: "we do not require submission in the sense of demanding total agreement with the Three Points; we recognize and bear with scruples which you may have, in the expectation that we together may come eventually to a better understanding of the truth; and [will] not bar those who have certain misgivings or divergent interpretations" (Acts of Synod, 1960, p. 114). While this decision is applicable to a specific situation and is not applicable to all synodical decisions, it does indicate something of the difference between the status of the confessions and the use and function of synodical decisions, even when the particular decision involved was an interpretation of the confessions.

Let us consider a few other examples. There are a number of synodical pronouncements concerning Scripture. The Belgic Confession speaks rather fully on this subject in Articles 2-7. The synodical decisions of 1959 deal mainly with the nature and extent of the inspiration of Scripture. These decisions resulted from the recommendations of a study committee of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod and are directed to problems raised by Neo-orthodoxy. The six decisions of this positive, doctrinal pronouncement are specifically said to be the "faith as it is clearly expressed in the creeds of the Reformed Churches" (Acts of Synod, 1959, p. 64).

The decisions of 1961 arise out of a specific controversy and are adjudicatory in nature. These decisions are not a systematic doctrinal statement like that of 1959. There are, however, a few statements within the decision that involve interpretation of the creeds as these words indicate: "That synod declare that both Scripture and the creeds establish an essential relationship between inspiration and infallibility, in which the infallibility of Scripture is inferred from inspiration, and inspiration secures the infallibility of all of Scripture" (Acts of Synod, 1961, p. 78).

The 1972 decisions on the nature and extent of biblical authority differ again. There was no particular case to adjudicate. The decisions of this synod were pastoral in character. As such, they are also interpretive of the confessions in relation to current trends of the "new theology" and the "new hermeneutics." Synod decided to submit the extensive study report to our churches "as providing guidelines for our understanding and further discussion of the nature and extent of biblical authority." And seven interrelated points concerning the nature and extent of biblical authority were adopted "as pastoral advice to the churches in the light of the report and in harmony with our common commitment to the" confessions, Belgic Confession, Articles 3-7 (Acts of Synod, 1972, p. 68).

The following year synod emphasized, in response to one consistory's

request to rescind the decision of 1972, that the "1972 Report 44 contains guidelines for a better understanding of the authority of Scripture, and should not be interpreted as a binding creedal statement" (Acts of Synod, 1973, p. 34). At the same time one of synod's grounds for not rescinding the 1972 decision was that "the overture has failed to prove that either Report 44 (Acts of Synod, 1972) or the seven points of pastoral advice contradicts either the Scriptures or the creeds" (Acts of Synod, 1973, p. 34). Thus the seven points of pastoral advice of 1972 remain "settled and binding" as synodical decisions, but their use and function is that of "pastoral advice" and while they are related to the confessions, they "should not be interpreted as a binding creedal statement."

Another example indicates that the diversity of the use and function of synodical pronouncements is evident within a single set of decisions, namely that of the Synod of 1973 on neo-Pentecostalism. This decision contains an official preamble. This is followed by a section in which synod rejects certain "attitudes, practices and teachings of neo-Pentecostalism." Six of these are listed and then synod declares that "insofar as the neo-Pentecostal movement displays these attitudes, practices, and beliefs . . . it reveals itself as a movement which runs counter to the Scripture and the Reformed faith" (Acts of Synod, 1973, p. 73-74). Then follow a number of "declarations as counsel to the churches" and counsels "to the neo-Pentecostals among us" (pp. 74-77). This is followed by decisions "concerning neo-Pentecostalism and office-bearers." One of these declares "that any office-bearer who holds the teaching that baptism in or with the Holy Spirit is a 'second blessing' distinct from and usually received after conversion, should be dealt with according to the stipulations of Article 88ff. of the Church Order." And the ground for that decision is that "this doctrine is contrary to the Scriptures and the Reformed Confessions" (p. 77).

There are additional variations in the remaining parts of this 1973 decision regarding neo-Pentecostalism, but the main types of the decisions have been referred to. Again, all the decisions are to be considered "settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Art. 29), but the use and function of the specific decisions is determined by synod's designation of that part of the decision as "preamble," or "counsels" to the churches or individuals, or the doctrinal-ethical part dealing with "attitudes, practices, and beliefs" which run "counter to the Scripture and the Reformed faith," and the juridical decision with respect to those who hold certain neo-Pentecostal views which disqualify them from office in the Christian Reformed Church. All of the decisions are "settled and binding" but they involve interpretations of the confessions or applications of the confessions and the Church Order as well as counsels in the form of pastoral advice. The use and function of such decisions is determined by the synodical decision itself.

Many more illustrations could be given concerning the diversity in the synodical decisions which involves their use and function. The examples given amply illustrate the diversity and also indicate the difficulty of presenting a clear statement as to how synodical decisions are

related to the confessions or how they fit into our confessional structure. We must now attempt to state this as clearly as possible.

C. *Relation of Synodical Pronouncements to the Confessions*

From the preceding study the following conclusions emerge:

1. The Extent of their Jurisdiction

The *confessions* of the Christian Reformed Church are held in common with other Reformed churches throughout the world. The *synodical pronouncements* are usually intended primarily for the members of the Christian Reformed Church. Thus there is a difference in the extent of their jurisdiction.

2. The Nature of their Authority

The authority of the confessions is subordinate to the Scriptures. The authority of synodical decisions is subordinate to the confessions and the Scriptures as the authority of the confessions is subordinate to the Scriptures. Subscription to the confessions is required of all office-bearers and agreement with the confessions is expected of all members of the church. *Synodical decisions* are "considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order." They must be in harmony with the Reformed creeds which the Christian Reformed Church accepts "as a true interpretation of this Word" (Church Order, Arts. 29 and 1). Thus there is a difference in the nature of the authority of the confessions and synodical pronouncements.

3. The Distinction of their Purposes

The *Reformed creeds* have the primary purpose of *confessing* the biblical faith held in common by its members and by other Reformed churches throughout the world. As such the *confessions* present a public testimony to the world concerning our Christian faith, serve a missionary or evangelistic purpose, function as forms of unity for the body of believers, function as instruments of faith—instruction for the covenant youth, and serve a juridical role in safeguarding the purity of the church in doctrine and life.

Synodical pronouncements of a doctrinal and ethical nature serve the purpose of further *expressing* the church's understanding of Scripture and the confessions. Synodical decisions sometimes interpret Scripture and the creeds; some synodical decisions augment or supplement what is confessed in the creeds; some synodical decisions make biblical applications to issues arising in historical circumstances that were not contemplated or specifically addressed in the confessions; some synodical decisions are juridical in nature dealing with deviations from Scripture or confession or adjudicatory in nature in resolving issues in dispute. Thus there are distinctions as to the purposes served by the confessions and synodical pronouncements.

4. The Measure of Agreement Expected

Full agreement with the *confessions* is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all office-bearers by signing the Form of Subscription. While *synodical decisions* are "settled and binding," subscription to synodical decisions is not re-

quired. Registering a negative vote with regard to a synodical decision is permissible, although this is not tolerated with respect to the confessions. In some instances synod has itself designated the degree of latitude which it permits (Acts of Synod, 1960, p. 114), but such decisions should not be applied universally. Guidelines for study, pastoral advice and other decisions of this nature allow for varying measures of agreement. Office-bearers are expected to "abide by" certain specified deliverances of synod as well as to synodical decisions in general. The well-being of the church is fostered when there is substantial unity with respect to all the decisions of synod. Yet the differences between the confessions and synodical pronouncements is evident in the measure of agreement that is expected.

5. Their Use and Function

The nature of the *confessions* as "forms of unity" determines their *wide* and *comprehensive* use and function in the church. *Synodical pronouncements* generally arise in connection with *limited* and *specific needs* in the life of the church. However, some of the more significant synodical pronouncements of a doctrinal and ethical nature can serve an ongoing function in *expressing* the faith of the church and its standpoint on various ethical issues.

On the basis of these observations and conclusions we make our recommendations on the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions.

III. COMPILATION OF SYNODICAL PRONOUNCEMENTS

In the committee's progress report to the Synod of 1974, a sample was presented of the type of materials that could be published in booklet form. The Synod of 1974 authorized "the committee to complete the compilation of materials for a book to contain pertinent synodical decisions" of a doctrinal and ethical nature. This project has now been completed. Because of the amount of material involved, and because the material involves past synodical decisions, it was decided, in consultation with the stated clerk of synod, to submit this material to synod in a separate package rather than add to the size and cost of the printed agenda.

The committee is increasingly convinced of the value of publishing this material. It is certainly true, as expressed in one of the grounds for our mandate, that "from time to time the church does in fact confess the faith by official declarations in interpretation and application of the confessions." Because the precise "use and function" of each of the relevant pronouncements is frequently defined by the action of synod itself, we have usually introduced the synodical decisions with a brief introductory comment or explanation.

The material as compiled is set up in the following way:

DOCTRINAL MATTERS

- I. Common Grace
- II. Conclusion of Utrecht
- III. Creation and Evolution

- IV. Ecumenicity
- V. Eschatology
- VI. Neo-Pentecostalism
- VII. Scripture

ETHICAL MATTERS

- VIII. Abortion and Birth Control
- IX. Amusements and Film Arts
- X. Christian Education
- XI. Christian Organizations and Corporate Responsibility
- XII. Church and State
- XIII. Homosexuality
- XIV. Liquor Problem
- XV. Lodge and Church Membership
- XVI. Lord's Day
- XVII. Marital Problems
- XVIII. Race Relations
- XIX. War and Pacifism

Synod should decide to include any of its significant decisions of 1975 in this book as well, and it should consider ways of keeping the publication up-to-date.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. That synod give the privilege of the floor to the reporter and the chairman of the study committee when the report is discussed at synod.

B. That synod adopt the following statement as expressing the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters and their relation to the confessions:

1. The Reformed Confessions are subordinate to the Scripture and accepted "as a true interpretation of this Word" (Church Order, Art. 1). These confessions are binding upon all the office-bearers as is indicated by their subscription to these confessions in the Form of Subscription. These confessions are binding upon all confessing members of the church as is indicated by their public profession of faith.

2. Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions and "shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Church Order, Art. 29). All office-bearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances.

3. The confessions and synodical pronouncements have nuances of differences. They differ in their extent of jurisdiction, in their nature of authority, in the distinction of purposes, in the measure of agreement expected, and in their use and function.

4. The use and function of synodical decisions is explicitly or implicitly indicated by the wording of the particular decision itself:

a. When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function.

b. When a synodical decision involves pronouncements that are related to the confessions or go beyond the confessions, the use and func-

tion of such decisions is to further express the faith of the church without such statements thereby becoming additions to the confessions.

c. When a synodical decision involves adjudication of a certain issue, this is its particular use and function although the decision may have doctrinal and ethical implications for the future.

d. When a synodical decision is expressed in the form of a testimony or letter, this is its use and function.

e. When a synodical decision is expressed as a guideline for further study or action, this is its use and function.

f. When a synodical decision is set forth as pastoral advice to churches or individuals, this is its use and function.

C. That synod authorize publishing and distributing the compiled doctrinal and ethical pronouncements in two forms:

1. In a booklet form with a printing of twelve thousand copies at a cost of approximately fifty cents per copy (mailing costs extra).

Grounds:

a. Synod of 1973 in its mandate to your committee affirmed "there is need for compiling, publishing, and distributing such declarations in a usable form." This was underscored in the amplified mandate to the committee by Synod of 1974 (Acts of Synod, pp. 40-41).

b. Synod envisioned a booklet that would be useful for all office-bearers, study committees, and/or advisory committees as well as those outside of our immediate communion who might be interested. At present the denomination numbers 762 congregations with nine thousand office-bearers.

2. In looseleaf form, with a durable cover, at a cost of approximately \$2.50 per copy. The same pages used for the booklet can be used for the looseleaf copies. The advantage is that decisions of subsequent synods can easily be inserted and the summary of pronouncements kept up to date. To provide every consistory and other interested parties would require an initial two thousand copies.

(Prices will be available for the advisory committee of synod.)

D. That synod instruct the Stated Clerk, in consultation with the Synodical Interim Committee, to provide materials from future Acts of Synod in order that the looseleaf booklets may be kept up to date.

E. That synod discharge the committee, now that the work assigned has been completed.

Henry Van Der Kam, chairman
John T. Holwerda, secretary
Hero Bratt
John A. De Kruyter
Fred H. Klooster
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