

Let us repent

The Reformed Churches (Liberated) after the synod held at Zuidhorn:

A call for Reformation

On behalf of the National Taskforce
Advice Regarding Ecclesiastical Developments
Brochure no. 2

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To the Members of the Reformed Churches

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*“Repent!
Turn away from all your offenses; then sin
will not be your downfall.
Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have
committed, and get a new heart and a new
spirit.
Why will you die, O house of Israel?
For I take no pleasure in the death of
anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord.
Repent and live!”*

(Ezekiel 18: 30b – 32)

I. INTRODUCTION

After the General Synod at Zuidhorn

The General synod held at Zuidhorn is over. This synod has been a very important one, especially with regard to the future of our Reformed churches. The delegates of this synod dealt with many issues about which there is division amongst us. In our previous brochure (LWVKO 2002) we wrote that the decisions made at the Synod of Zuidhorn will be decisive for the direction of the Reformed Churches. Are we going to choose a direction which is pleasing to God, or will we choose a direction which is mainly determined by people who have their own ideas? At the time this was the big question we placed before the upcoming Synod of Zuidhorn. Now that the synod is finished we can take stock. Did Synod pay attention to the worries and concerns that were placed on its table? Did the synod regard and oppose wrong influences within the Reformed Churches? Did Synod (again) take the antithesis into account while making its judgments? Was Synod willing and did it have the courage to reject false tolerance, humanistic thinking and unbiblical compromises? Did Synod guide in the ways of the Lord? Did the Synod choose to be faithful in this crucial phase of the developments within our Reformed Churches?

Wrong way

With sadness and grief we have to conclude that Synod did not succeed in finding the right way. In nearly all instances synod continued in the line of the previous two synods (held at Berkel and Leusden). Nearly all of the more than a **thousand** appeals and ‘declarations of support’ were rejected. Synod did not pay enough attention to the difficulties outlined in the appeals which were based on Scripture. A confrontation with these scriptural references is lacking in many of synod’s decisions. In the explanations to different grounds of decisions ‘Synod’ argues that the activities of many concerned brothers and sisters has led to unnecessary delay and discord both within their own congregations and at major assemblies. Synod therefore, with so many words, summons the so-called ‘concerned’ to stop with their criticism and to submit themselves to the decisions taken, to, in this way, maintain peace.

Repentance is necessary

The distress within our Reformed Churches, however, has only been added to. As Reformed Churches we find ourselves in an exceptionally deep crisis. It is with sadness and disappointment that we have to come to this conclusion. Return from the taken path is still possible. However, time is running out! Many issues have been dealt with several times at different synods. According to church polity those issues can’t be dealt with again. On some of

those issues synod decided that they concern matters which are not relevant to all churches in the federation. Therefore, they decided that there is no need for the churches to ratify these issues. Yet, amongst those issues are some that have caused a widespread unrest within the churches. Those issues have been discussed publicly and many church members feel closely involved with to them! Are the decisions regarding the Sunday and the Sunday-rest and the celebration of the Holy Super by our army-chaplains not issues for which all the churches bear responsibility?

The wrong direction in which the churches were heading has been confirmed. The way of appeal has been cut off for too many decisions. How shall we proceed? Repentance, yes, a return to respectful obedience to all of God's Word and the confessions of the church has definitely become necessary – but how?

Responsibility

The deep crisis in our Reformed churches is not limited to a (large) amount of tangible ecclesiastical or theological matters. It concerns much wider and deeper the reformed doctrine (among others, as in Kampen) and of the reformed way of life. We will name a few: preaching, the worship services, liturgy and church discipline, also the authority and the place of the confessions, the doctrine of the church, and the authority of Scripture and the commandments of God, criticism of the Bible, but also the day to day functioning of the communion of saints, life in the covenant and the way in which the antithesis is understood.

This widespread decay is not the same everywhere and it does not stand out to the same extend in every congregation. Therefore not everyone may feel addressed by all this. However, as the Lord, in a federation of churches, binds us to each other we are responsible for each other. This includes all of the reformed way of life. Moreover the widespread decay is in every way connected to the decisions made at synod. All these factors are related to each other and they all determine whether we remain 'church of the Lord Jesus Christ' (as found in Art. 29 of the BC). Synod's decisions determine the direction of the churches, also the direction of our local congregations.

So there is a clear connection to our own spiritual well-being and that of our brothers and sisters. Everyone is now faced with this penetrating question: in which way do we want to serve the Lord? To what extend do we take the commandments of the Lord seriously? And, at what point do we realize that we, as sinners, are lost unless we honour the commandments of the Lord?

Truth

The essence of all this is truth: the truth of the Word of God. Keeping that truth is all about the authority and honour of God Himself. Today it is no longer fashionable to believe and to maintain absolute truths. Truth, today, is whatever the individual considers it to be true. At the same time one is not allowed to hold others to such a truth. It is no longer tolerated that there is a truth, which surpasses every personal experience. This can be traced back in the decisions made by major assemblies, in our church life and in our society (in ethics, for example, when dealing with issues regarding how we should live before God). The biblical 'antithesis' has been swapped for 'synthesis'. The battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent; or the struggle with the church on the one side and the world and the false church on the other has been put aside for synthesis. This synthesis consists of: room for many opinions and the possibility that different versions of 'truth' can exist together. With the rise of the so-called 'narrative-preaching' we observe that besides the standard of God's Word there is the standard of personal insight and our personal experience. We want to leave each other more space, with, as underlying thought: as long as I receive my personal space within the church it will be OK. All this is promoted while the absolute authority of God towards His church and towards His children is being denied. This might not always be done openly, but in practice this is reality. From being a "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3: 15) the church has become an institution where

everyone can give his or her opinion. On the one hand this is a new phenomenon; it is the post modern experience of the change of the century. Yet, at the same time it is old; it is the ancient sin of mankind, which wants to be equal to God in order to be able to determine for themselves what is right and wrong. In this way our own practices become standard and normative instead of the law of God. This is the foundation of the decay within the churches.

However: "To the law and the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isaiah 8:20)

The way to reformation by return

As mentioned before, repentance and reformation are necessary and urgent if we, as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Netherlands, want to have a future. "Reformation by return", that is a return to a life-style in complete submission to the Word of the Lord. It means a return in our personal lives and a return in our lives as Church of Christ. It is a return from our own 'ego' to Him Who is the way, the truth and the life.

In the balance of this brochure we want to point out the urgent necessity of this repentance. We will set out the background of the decay within the Reformed Churches. We will pay attention to a number of wrong decisions made by synod. We want to look at what Scripture says about our attitude in this crisis. We will also deal with the confessions, and finally we will point out the seriousness of this crisis and point out a possible way back.

"Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD; Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled; you have not pardoned."
(Lamentations 3: 40 – 42)

When God's people choose the wrong direction and do not repent from it then the Lord will give those people over to their own sins. Then God's judgments will come. Then the candle stick will be removed. May the Lord work in such a way that the last words of Lamentations 3: 42 need not become reality for our Reformed Churches.

(Note: By the term 'Reformed Churches' the Reformed Churches as they assembled at the general Synod in Zuidhorn 2002/2003 are meant; for the post office they are also designated with the addition 'liberated' or in Dutch: (Vrijgemaakt).

II. BACKGROUNDS

II. 1 CHURCH LIFE AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

II. 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In our days the church has been forced back to the sidelines in society. We are faced with apostasy on a large scale - a falling away from the living God. In our western world with its prosperity there are many temptations for the children of the covenant. God's Word characterizes this age as a time of war between Satan and the Church. It is the war of the dragon against the woman's offspring that keep 'the commandments of God and have the testimony of Christ' (Revelation 12). For this reason the apostle Peter writes: 'the end of all things is at hand. Therefore be serious...' (I Peter 4: 7ff). Doctrine and life according to the Word of God and a trusting involvement with the Lord of the covenant requires us to fight the good fight until the end. When we, as God's children, take part in the suffering of Christ there can even be joy (I Peter 4:13). In this way the Church of God works towards the return of its head, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the expectation of Christ's return the church holds on to the truth with joy. Yet while holding on with joy she is also watchful!

This overview provides a sketch of the doctrine and life of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the year of our Lord 2002. We do this from the command:

"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (I John 4: 1).

We follow this command in order that the Lord may say to us as His Church:

"Since you have kept My command to endure patiently, I also will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon! Hold on to what you have, that no one will take your crown." (Revelation 3:10, 11)

II. 1.2 PREACHER AND PREACHING

An important mark of the church of Jesus Christ is the complete preaching of the Word of God, the pure preaching of the gospel (BC art. 29). Especially in this age the church needs powerful preaching to stand strong and to remain watchful. The content of this preaching is to be God's Word. It is to be the preaching of the Christ and it is to be directed at the church of today with the promises of God's covenant, grace and covenant obligations. The foundation of this scriptural preaching is to be collated by exegesis of the relevant scripture-passages in the context of all of Scripture and the history of salvation. While working this out the preacher will keep in mind real time in which he lives and the continuing war between the seed of the dragon and the seed of the woman. This requires the preacher to know his congregation but also the dangers of the world and our own flesh which continue to plague us. Thus the preacher will comfort, encourage and teach, but also admonish. In this way the word of God is preached with relevance while calling for faith and repentance. In this way the preacher is a true ambassador of the Lord Christ, the king of the Church. In this way the sermon truly is proclamation of the living and powerful Word of God, which at the same time is sharper than any two-edged sword discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4: 12, 13).

Uncertainty / doubt

We live in an age in which preachers publicly portray the content and the meaning of the age-old confessions of the church in a relativistic manner. At the same time the authoritativeness of the preaching has diminished. Some preachers openly admit that their faith is a mixture composed of numerous ideas of non-reformed theologians. For them the surety of the age-old truths has gone. These shepherds and those who feel close to them miss the basis from which to preach

the healthy doctrine of the reformed churches to their sheep; and from which to reject everything that is contrary to the complete doctrine of Salvation. How can they feed the flock and lead them in the right ways? How can they be ambassadors of Christ? Christ wants them to admonish the congregation to be reconciled with God, in Christ's name, according to II Corinthians 5: 18-20! It appears that frequently ministers deliver their own opinions from the pulpit instead of preaching Godly wisdom. When that happens the preaching no longer has the authority of 'thus says the Lord.'

Consideration for the Hearer

Too strong a focus on the hearer comes at the cost of the Godly message. In the last years the theological training in Kampen has placed too much emphasis on the thoughts and experiences of the congregation. Instead of preaching the call to serve the Lord and the wealth and comfort of that call, frequently the hearers and their salvation are made the center of the preaching and the starting point for it. Historic-redemptive preaching is being considered as an attribute of the first period after the Liberation and is labeled as 'intellectualistic' and 'rationalistic'. It is said that the mind is too involved while the heart is not involved enough. Focusing on the great work of our Lord, Who leads His Church through all manner of difficulties and temptations to eternal bliss, goes over the heads of the congregation according to many.

No longer is a precise exegesis, a precise understanding of what God's Word says, where the original text is compared and Scripture is compared to Scripture, no longer are these used as the starting point for a sermon. Our students of theology are taught that they must start with a *personal meditation* on the text.

Narrative Preaching

The assumption that the preaching is less and less based on the call to the preacher to be a servant of the Word to proclaim the Word is exemplified in the so-called narrative preaching. In this 'story-telling' style of preaching the content is no longer determined by God's own Word but by a story by the preacher, often a fantasy about something that the Lord, in His wisdom, has not revealed in His Word. That means that the preacher is of the opinion that we do not have sufficient in what the Lord has revealed in His Word. It means that we get to hear a special message from the preacher. That is how it happens that sermons are delivered for which the Scripture barely needs to be opened. Own stories and associated images take the place of the wonderful gospel for the people of the covenant. In this way much poverty has taken the place of the living preaching: the content of the preaching as from the Sender is changed to appease the hearer and as from the creative thinking of the preacher. Sometimes a Bible text is added to the message. In this way the Bible is used to provide some illustrative material. This kind of thing will happen particularly in so-called 'theme services'. As a result one can hear a sermon about the Netherlands Bible Association.

Exegesis and in-depth study are often pushed aside by the need for 'simplicity'. People may not 'chop'. That is how treasures in God's Word are left useless. Preaching becomes an 'infantilizing' of God's Word, a strong inclination to bring everything to a child's level. Or else everything is directed to the present or absent outsiders. In this way the Scriptural address concerning the responsibility of the older members does not receive attention.

Christ and Him Crucified

In many sermons the text is no longer imbedded in the context, the Scripture passage in which it is found, or the whole of Scripture. Then sermons become particularly exemplary. A described event becomes a direct example for our lives. In this way it is neglected to see the text in its historic-redemptive context – the great plan of God. It can also happen that a sermon is narrowed to the extent that it serves only as a number of activist directions for practical living. While on the one hand so much objection is brought against the 'you shall' of the Law of God, on

the other hand the 'you must' of holy practical living is endorsed vigorously. The experience of man receives an increasing roll in the assurance of faith. Man is directed to look at his own life, to look at what God has done in his life! Increasingly, in some congregations, sermons are preached in which Christ is not mentioned. Also, some preach God the Father separately from His relationship to the Son. Here there is no longer to be spoken of proclamation and administration of atonement, while it is mandatory that the Lord Christ must be at the center of the proclamation. We do not know any different gospel (Gal. 1: 3, 4). This is how, in the Reformed Churches the core of the gospel is weakened and whereby the believer is tossed back to depend upon himself.

Antithesis and the Struggle of Faith

Tuning in and adapting to the hearer leads to a contraction of the norm of Scripture and a failure to preach it with emphasis, but practical possibilities are adjusted to. Over against the idea of 'normative idealism' (it is idealistic to hold on to the norms under all circumstances) one is encouraged to take into account the fall into sin and the broken-ness of the world. The word and the idea of antithesis are seldom used anymore. Being held strictly to the commandments of the Lord is easily associated with legalism and inflexibility (this would be considered a mark of the first period after the Liberation). "*With fear and trembling work out your salvation*" ...How seldom can this text be heard in the preaching. The conscience must be comforted and not brought into the crisis of the gospel. There is much emphasis on grace while the demands of the covenant are not being clearly preached. It appears that the demands of the covenant must be erased in the face of grace. It is claimed that it is no longer time for 'you shall' but 'you may'. Promise and demand are being pulled apart from one another. They are even placed in contradiction to one another while the Scriptural truth that it is precisely God's promise that we are able to obey His commands in the power of the Holy Spirit are passed by. In the preaching God's anger and covenant wrath remain out of view. As a result of this type of one-sided preaching a new basis exists for a type of covenant automatism and a secularized world in which church members become increasingly foreign to the antithesis of Scripture. Church members seldom receive sufficient food to fight the good fight of faith. With regard to the fourth commandment, the seventh commandment and the life of holiness the preaching is frequently misleading or misses the call to faith and repentance that the Lord requires for all His commandments. Where is the call still heard for obedient and radical faith-obedience that requires self-sacrifice?

Good Feelings

The Church of Christ in her struggle to rebuff even all the beginnings of error is seldom the subject for Word proclamation. Pointing out the address of the Church of Jesus Christ in the midst of so many church communities that unjustly refer to themselves as church finds very little room. Preaching about brotherly love and love for the neighbour in which mutual censure and fiery encouragement is absent misses the necessary reality. It evaporates in a horizontal application giving everyone a good feeling. As a result of all this deviance from correct preaching the ability of the members of Christ's Church to discern is destroyed and the full proclamation of the Word to build the Church is neglected.

II. 1.3 SACRAMENTS

We learn in our confessions (Heid. Cat, Lord's Day 25-30; Bel. Conf. art. 33) that Christ through His Spirit endows His Church with the sacraments to strengthen faith. That faith which He works through the preaching of His Word He confirms through baptism and Lord's Supper. That our complete salvation rests in the 'once for all' sacrifice of Christ is first taught us in the gospel and thereafter regularly strengthened when we use these sacraments. God has added them to the Word of the gospel because of our lack of wisdom and the weakness of our faith. In this way our

salvation, of which He makes us partakers, is strengthened by God through visible signs and seals.

The Sign Made Independent

At present a proper use of the sacraments in the Reformed Churches is under threat. At baptism the sign of God's covenant is being given an incorrect independent accent as a result of Liedboek (a newly introduced book of Hymns) use. The impression is given that the sign of water itself has a magic meaning. Also by singing 'and no one can pull them from Thy hand' (LB 335) from the aforementioned Liedboek brings in a wrong covenant automatism. The call for the parents and the covenant child to fight the good fight from out of the covenant promises is missing in this song.

Holy Communion

The Lord's Supper, which has been established for the strengthening of the preached Word, is receiving an improper place as the result of the implementation of the '*ordinarium*'. The Lord's Supper now becomes the high point of the worship service. In this way the preaching is being pushed away from its central place. There is more. There where ongoing public sin is permitted, such as divorce, the table of the Lord is defiled due to lack of implementation of Church discipline. When unscriptural songs are announced for singing during the Lord's Supper celebration the festive atmosphere which may be a mark of this meal is spoiled and destroys the unified praise of the Lord because the communion of saints is broken.

Where the Lord's Supper will be celebrated without unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, as happens with members of other church affiliation in times of crisis, it will be defiled.

II. 1.4 DISCIPLINE

The third mark of the Church of Jesus Christ is discipline. Articles 29, 30 and 32 of the Belgic Confession and answer 85 of the Heidelberg Catechism teach that church discipline is an essential instrument for the maintenance of God's Church. The church must punish the sin and admonish the sinner to repent. The shepherds are given the task of discipline in order to ensure that everything is done in obedience to God. The book of Judges teaches us what happens when there is no discipline. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. The Lord wants a holy people, because He is holy. What is the situation in the Reformed Churches with regard to this key to the kingdom of heaven?

Absence of discipline is absence of love

In many congregations there is no, or hardly any, talk about the Scriptural exercise of discipline. In the case of public, unconfessed sins such as absence from worship services, divorce, adultery through unacceptable second marriages, extra-marital relationships and homosexuality discipline is frequently not applied. Discipline is frequently seen in the church press as 'placing someone under the law' and as 'handling disproportionately' (see deputies regarding divorce). One is expected according to this idea, also in the case of public, unconfessed sin, first to stand next to such a person in the (eventual) growth of his/her faith. The non-exercise of discipline by admittance to the Lord's Supper does not mean the consistory condones such a person's behaviour (Decision Synod Zuidhorn re. Divorce). How contrary to our Form for the Lord's Supper that speaks about invitation and admonition. This kind of thinking leads to lack of discipline and is precisely love-less towards the people involved and to the congregation, as unconfessed sins over which the Lord is angered remain. From God's Word we know that by dealing in this manner the wrath of God can come on the whole congregation. (Matthew 2: 13-17.)

II. 1.5 WORSHIP SERVICES AND LITURGY

The worship services are the high points of the day of the Lord, the day of rest consecrated to Him. As we see the day of the Lord's return drawing near we must urge one another all the more to attend the worship service; and in particular, because Christ, Himself calls His Church, His bride. In the worship services Christ is in the center. He meets with us in covenant discussion. He is speaking in the Scripture reading and the preaching. The servant of the Word, as ambassador of Christ, proclaims the Word of God with authority. The greeting, the blessing and the law are also God's Words. As an 'amen' to that Word of God the congregation may also take the Word of God on its lips. Even in the confession of faith and in her singing the words must be as from God. That's the kind of holiness the Lord expects from His children in the covenant interaction. In prayer the Lord shows us the way, how we are to pray. And all this is only possible in Christ, our mediator. In this way our meeting with Him may be pleasing to Him. In this manner God, through His Spirit works faith, praise and adoration in us. In this way the worship service can serve as a token of the enjoyment of God because of His great deeds of creation and redemption. In this all God is central for the Church of Jesus Christ that is on its way to the day of the return of her Lord and Saviour.

The central place of the Word

In the last years there has come a trend in our Reformed Churches that becomes increasingly evident. The central role for God and His Word in the worship service is being taken over by the believers themselves. An example of this is the singing of 'free choice' songs. In this way the proclamation of the Word of God is increasingly diminished. Songs with double meaning or with completely objectionable content are supplanting the age old Psalms from their undisputed place in the worship service. Sometimes these songs even take the place of the proclamation of God's Word.

This has to do with a new vision of the liturgy in which not only God's Word and the official proclamation of it stand in the center, but that includes non-official expressions of it through debatable texts by third parties. Such texts usually express a good feeling, while the struggle of faith in covenant obedience, the God-willed antithesis, and the wrath of God and the deep meaning of Christ's atoning sacrifice are minimized. The 'good' feeling of faith experience soon gains the upper hand over the obedient 'amen' to the read and preached Word. The result of this subjective vision whereby the experience of the believer takes increasing precedent becomes visible in the introduction of music by idolized talent and drama in the worship service.

Ritual Experiences

It is claimed that the introduction of the so-called ordinarium will provide an extra, more ritualistic experiential element in the worship service, just like it is known in the Romish services. In this ordinarium songs of praise play a large role in a sanctification ritual, in which we, as it were, sanctify ourselves as the service progresses. In a procession, a trip to heaven, man goes forward to go to God. In that the thoughts and experiences about Christ's sacrifice in the Lord's Supper must become the focal point of the worship service. See how the experience, the own actions of the believers and mystical, take over the main role. Isn't (wasn't) the reformed worship service much, much richer, where the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts by the proclamation of the Godly Word and in this way the kingdom is either opened or shut? (H.C., Lord's Day 25, 31). The Lord's Supper has been given as a strengthening of our faith but not to become a focal point of the worship service in itself. The aforementioned liturgical changes lead us away from God's Word in the covenant conversation of God with His congregation and are being replaced by the (mystical) experiences and activities of the believer. This also comes out in the special theme services and children's services, and the more recent youth services, including 'God Fashion'. The worship services are no longer being seen as the meeting of God with His

covenant congregation. Groups of believers now expect special attention by the adaptation of form and content of message and liturgy. Mankind and his needs are primary. Such a person may, consequently, without admonition from office bearers, increasingly choose to absent himself from the gatherings, whenever he or she feels the need to do so. In many places the afternoon services are seeing less and less attendance.

II. 1.6 THE FUNCTIONING OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

In the communion of saints all believers have a personal relationship with the Lord Christ, Who grants His treasures and gifts. As members they also have this together. The most important gift that Christ gives to us as Church is the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a result of being united in the one Spirit each will be willing to use his gifts for the benefit and salvation of the other members within the communion of saints. This means, for example, that in times of ecclesiastical and spiritual difficulty and division members struggle together by the light of God's Word to determine the will of the Lord. The office of all believers functions in such a manner that in the contacts with each other the unity in the truth is sought in our attitude toward life and the content of our faith. Through this we can grow as a community in obedience to our Lord Christ (Eph.4). That is what the Church in the last times needs because that is what makes her strong and in addition it makes outsiders jealous. Then we show that the Holy Spirit is at work in us.

United Striving and Praising

How does the community function? Often when there is sickness there is still a watching out for one another. But how is that when there are ecclesiastical or spiritual difficulties? In many congregations it does not seem possible to discuss the concerns about ecclesiastical developments. Ecclesiastical developments are not discussed or tested together within the community. Consistories do not want to listen to the written or spoken concerns. There is plainly, often no interest in knowing, or sharing the difficulties and concerns. With regard to the principal matters there is no longer a sharing of the same wave length. We no longer understand one another. A referral to Scripture no longer leads to a desire to struggle together to determine the will of the Lord. There is no inclination to leave out of the worship services those songs that cause concern about singing wrong songs from the songbook. In this way many worship services are defiled because of the lack of unified singing.

Those who express concern and feel burdened about deviation from the truth are considered meddlesome and difficult. Sometimes in the preaching concerned members are addressed (with more or less careful terms) as legalists, fanatics, busybodies and pessimists. In an editorial in the weekly *De Reformatie*, Volume 78, Jan. 4, 2003 they receive the title "right extremists", who continually kick against the church. The concerned stand alone with their difficulties while their brothers and sisters take offense at them. At times they are reminded of the possibility of leaving the church! The communion of saints is broken!

II. 1.7 FUNCTIONING OF THE CONFESSIONS

*All confessing members, and in particular those in special offices, have with their positive response, in fact, declared under oath that they would abide by the teachings of the church as summarized in the three forms of unity. Within the church we may and must hold one another to this positive response which has been given toward God and the congregation. The great value of these confessional forms has been seen throughout the centuries: they served well in great reformations in the church. The Liberation allowed the churches to profit from believing and confessing again the scriptural truths about the church as it was written in articles 27 – 29 of the *Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis* (The Belgic Confession of Faith). This reformation penetrated, and the belief that the church is the power center for all of life was put into practice by the*

establishment of reformed organizations in a variety of fields. In particular, the bond between church and education received stature again. By the bringing of great sacrifices on a large scale reformed schools were established.

Reject all beginnings of heresy

But this positive movement has been disparaged and 'ongoing reformation' has been rejected. The cause for this approach is that the simple and Scriptural confession regarding the Church was exchanged for an outline in which the old leaven of pluriformity and the invisible church is re-introduced. In much of the discussion about the Church articles 27 – 29 of the confession no longer function or do not function properly. A 'true church concept' is quickly discarded as a 'typically Liberated' idea by many. In much of the speaking and writing about the Church truth is held back. The command of the Lord to strive against (the beginning of) all heresy is suppressed by many who write and speak. The progressive scripture criticism and other errors in different church federations (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken and Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken) are no longer seen as obstacles on the way to unity. The old pluriform idea of working together in organized evangelism activities also again receives legitimacy.

To address one another as bound to our confessions hardly functions any more in consistory and other ecclesiastical meetings, among ones own brothers and sisters, or by the press which provides guidance to our families.

There even are ministers who experience increased difficulty in preaching about the providence of God (H.C. Lord's Day 10).

II. 1.8 TRAINING FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

The training for the ministry of the Word has from of old been considered as a gift from God to be sustained by the Church. The churches must be assured that the teachers, in particular, are true to their affirmation of Scripture, Confessions and Church Order. Protection of the truth at such a school has immense influence on the faithfulness of the Reformed Church to the Word of God. It is most important that the Churches remain active with regard to the spiritual quality of this training.

Tent without Foundation

An increasing number of statements and publications from different teachers at the Theological University at Kampen cause serious doubts about such faithfulness in the school.

Instructor Drs. C.J. Haak states, in his book *Kerk in the 21e eeuw (Church in the 21st Century)* that the Church must focus completely on evangelism. All of Scripture is said to point at this. The Church is said to have understood this completely wrong for centuries in that it has been focusing on inward growth and defense. In this activist approach he forgets how the Church is typified in the new dispensation of God's Word: those who keep God's commandments and who have the witness of Jesus Christ. The lack of appreciation for the need to protect the truth over against heresy is the seriously missing part of his book – an inoffensiveness that can be deadly for true evangelism. This instructor has let fall from his lips that pews (where members sit to hear God's Word) should be removed from the churches to make room for open conversation areas (where people with their ideas can take the floor).

Instructor Dr. C. J. Burger introduced sermon preparation groups and sermon methods that brought about a change in content focus in the preaching. The content has been more strongly focused in the direction of personal experiences of the preacher and in the direction of the hearer. In this method sermon preparation begins with meditation about the chosen text instead of exegesis (understanding the true meaning of the text). Narrative preaching has also been introduced in Kampen. This has led to the domination of the creativity of the preacher.

Stories about Creation and the Fall into Sin

Respective publications out of Kampen by Drs. K. van Bekkum and Drs. J. J. T. Doedens take distance from the sensorial perceptibility and historic correctness as that is revealed in the beginning of God's Word to be the beginning of history. In the publication of Drs van Bekkum (inserted in *Geloven in Zekerheid*, TU volume 1, 2002) the decisions of General Synod Assen, 1926 are openly criticized. In the publication of Drs Doedens (inserted in *Woord op Schrift*, Kok, Kampen, 2002), an elaboration on a doctoral thesis for the Theological University, he places the historicity of the (order of) the days of creation into discussion. In its place he provides a literary approach of creation as a theme introduced by the Israeli Sabbath week! In this he follows the same argumentation as the Christelijke Gereformeerde professor, Dr B. J. Oosterhoff in his explanation of Genesis 2 and 3, regarded as heresy by the Reformed Churches. This is, then, (a beginning of) Scripture criticism and therefore should not have been permitted to be published. In addition, in these writings, the Sabbath day that followed His six creation days, blessed and sanctified by God Himself, is diminished.

Metaphors and Examples

Instructor, Drs A. L. Th. de Bruijne is co-author of the report regarding divorce and therefore co-responsible for the new manner of Bible reading introduced in it. There the congregation receives the right to declare God's commandments invalid or not applicable. In addition, he recently pleaded, in *Woord op Schrift* for the reading of Scriptural writings within the context of their time as well as reading many Scripture passages metaphorically. Metaphoric or symbolic matter can even be woven into historical portions of Scripture. Scripture passages such as Genesis 1 – 3 could better be read as literary texts, as stories. Then the facts related in these stories could in reality have been quite different. What is told us by historical writers in God's Word, as consequence of this approach, has in reality not always happened. Also God's commandments must then lose their literal meaning. Drs de Bruijne changes the function of the commandments of the Lord into guidelines rather than regarding them as literal norms. Following Christ and living the style of the kingdom is minimized when the normative power of the covenant commands of the Lord are diminished. All such philosophical talk takes an extensive distance from the covenant commands. (More about the philosophic theory behind this in *Blijf in mijn Liefde*, see information at the back of this brochure.)

Divine Inspiration

The Godly inspiration of God's Word is no longer safe in Kampen. Drs de Bruijne defends the idea that a variety of human factors, such as folk traditions, mythological material, and imperfect historical figures help in determining the meaning of text of God's Word. Godly direction would come out in the fact that the authors would work with as much integrity as possible on the material. With as much integrity as possible! Such a doctrine of inspiration remains completely at the human level. Such reasoning comes into conflict with what Holy Writ itself says about the authorship of the Scriptures. Namely, that it is the work of the Holy Spirit and that Holy Writ is infallible (e.g. 2 Peter 1: 21).

The governors of the Theological University in Kampen have been charged, on behalf of the churches, to keep watch over the maintenance of the basis in Kampen. They have judged the recent publication by Drs. De Bruijne, *Woord of Schrift*. Their unanimous conclusion in their officially published press release is that the starting points of Drs. De Bruijne are of real interest and that support should be provided when work is continued along this line. They ask for the blessing of God on such work. By way of the governors the churches are co-responsible for the encouragement of error and Scripture criticism in the Gereformeerde Kerken (Reformed Churches) and in the education of upcoming shepherds.

Patchwork Quilt

In addition instructor, Professor Dr. M. te Velde stated in a newspaper article that we must get away from commandment ethics, where commandments are laid upon people. He also claims that the Psalms provided to us by God have no more value than the poetic works of those who provide songs for the Liedbook (an existing hymnbook) or other modern songs. He would like to see the latter become available for the worship services in a hundred fold.

There are ministers who have recently finished their studies who typify what they have been taught about their belief as a patchwork quilt wherein many non-reformed theologians have made their contributions.

The student society has recently been opened to students who do not belong to the Reformed churches. What we are left with is an education that produces a great risk, namely, that the student will lose his faithfulness to the healthy doctrine and thus can lose his belief. It is almost unavoidable that the seminary produces ministers that are not molded in a Reformed way.

II. 1.9 EQUIPPED AND SANCTIFIED

As a result of the Liberation the church became aware again of the need for sanctification in all areas of life. Included in this sanctification, it became clear, was the great need to belong to the body of Christ. From out of the vision of "life is one" reformed organizations were established in many areas of community, politics and social life for the equipment of the believers. Reformed education in its various aspects was also built up out of this mind set. Even an own newspaper came into existence, the Gereformerd Gezinsblad [Reformed Family Paper], that provided highly essential insights for daily living. In this way people were a hand and a foot for one another with regard to the food from the Church of Christ. That is how one could stand antithetically in the world with the armour of faith. That is also how mission and evangelism were undertaken. The Church was a light on a candlestick, an effective salt. That is precisely what takes place through the sanctified life of church members that do God's will (See Matth.5).

Unified at the same front?

However during the 1980's a development arose within the Church that consistently steered away from the above-mentioned sanctification and ongoing reformation. This development was particularly influenced by the *Nederlands Dagblad [Netherlands Daily]*, follower of the *Gereformerd Gezinsblad [Reformed Family Paper]*. In 1982 its subscribers were asked to agree to a change in course with regards to page 2. The idea was to publish two issues of each paper. One issue would be for Reformed subscribers with their own page 2 (Kerk Nieuws – Church News), and the other for non-Reformed subscribers. This second version would contain news from all kinds of church communities and groups. In many meetings around the country the majority of subscribers rejected this idea. Still, the editor-in-chief, supported by the other editors and the board, set the new direction in motion. This time the subscribers were ignored. There were warnings in the church press against this direction, but they were ignored. In 1983 the editor at that time, J. P. de Vries, wrote an article entitled *Samen aan het ene front [Together at the Same Front]*. In it he claims that we stand together with all other Christians at the same front. We must, then, sooner appeal than confront and thus work together.

In the discussion that followed the comment was made that this must be typified as front-shrinkage and that in this manner the anti-baptist front of the reformation was let go. Yet in our day we see the Baptist spirit becoming increasingly prevalent and dangerous for the churches. Already, it was remarked back then, in an increasing measure we must deal with the minimalizing of the officially organized Church as the power center for the struggle of the spirits. Further we will need to deal with inter-church societies, individualistic piety, and the restriction of God's word to a few orthodox essential truths, a sickly urge for religious experiences, the

rejection of child baptism and the desire for sects that insist on re-baptism, the Israel cult. Behind such influences satanic powers are at work and they must be withstood.

In 1986 that was a correct, even prophetic typification, and today we must say that it applies as well, but even more so.

Spiritual Warfare

In 1985 the foundation *Woord en Wereld [Word and World]* began to distribute brochures because 'a concern raising return' needed to be established 'on the point of the principal advice in the present spiritual warfare'.

In the mean time the ND continued on in its new direction. As the first reformed organization it changed its principal course. The tie to the Church as power center also for the work of the press was loosened and the paper became inter-church! The reformed paper, which had been correctly characterized as the daughter of the Church, and which had meant so much in the past, especially in the preservation of the Church in the sixties, became a front-runner of the deformation of reformed life.

One after another reformed organizations broke the tie with the Church. This process of secularization took place almost un-noticeably – step by step. Meanwhile life in the Church and in society are no longer considered as a unity. Societies were opened to those outside of the Church. The reformed character of the *Gereformeerde Gezinsblad* (now ND) was abandoned. Reformed politics was offered up for the fusion with others who did not confess the (complete) reformed faith. Recently the reformed identity of education was also given over as a prize to this movement when a national decision was made to open membership of school associations to non-church members. All this flows out of a vision of the church that conflicts with what we confess in Articles 27 – 29 of the NGB [Nederlands Geloof Belijdenis – Belgic Confession.] In this way there comes increasing room for the influence of error in the thoughts and lives of church members. 'Life is one' becomes all too true now that these new ideas have entered the Church via paper and reformed organizations.

Consumerism

Where the preaching misses the instruction of the law we see how easily secularism and consumerism take an unblemished hold on the thinking and living of covenant children. Examples of this are an extra-marital sexual lifestyle, the acceptance of unscriptural divorce and illegitimate second marriages, the complete participation in godless culture and music, the excessive acceptance of homosexuality, no longer keeping the Sunday holy and the supplanting of study societies by consumerism. In short, the effect of heresy effect does not lack in consequences for personal faith living. The understanding of the covenant, the church and the unity of the church is darkened. The understanding of the need for holiness in accordance with God's will and God's commandments is veiled. What is the status of God's right and His honour?

II. 1.10 THE FUNCTIONING OF CHURCH POLITY

One of the benefits of the Liberation was that the reformed understanding of church polity received its rightful place again. In particular over against the power grab of synods in the time prior to the Liberation there was a return to the reformed fundamentals of church polity. During the struggle of the Liberation much insight was provided about the fundamentals of reformed church polity in many publications.

The fundamentals of reformed church polity include the fact that it is the churches that determine the agendas of synods. A synod does not have the right to deal with matters that have not been placed on its agenda by the churches.

In addition the churches ought to have sufficient time before synods convene to consider the reports and overtures received by the calling church. Churches can then provide synod with their

judgment about these by either directly addressing synod or by making use of the church orderly way. In addition the churches may want to consider the position of those they delegate on the issues to be dealt with at synod.

“Deputatocracy”

We observe a deviation from the concept of reformed church polity. Also this benefit of the Liberation appears to have been destroyed. In the last number of years the number of committees of deputies has increased drastically. Yet the churches have often not asked for them, but some synods have appointed deputies on their own authority for a variety of issues. Beyond that is the fact that deputies are beginning to behave much more authoritatively rather than in an advisory or serving capacity.

Deputies are also bringing forward an increasing number of reports and proposals at synod which the churches have not seen before hand, nor over which the churches have been able to form a judgment.

Instead of first determining the admissibility of such documents, they are dealt with without further ado. And there is hardly any complaint about this process from among the churches.

II. 2 THE DRIVING SPIRIT

In Such a Broad Manner

Why is it that the faith obedience and the love within the Church have been affected in such a broad manner? Where does the source for such a deformation in the churches lie? How does it happen that thinking has become so darkened that truth remains hidden, that it is mixed with the lie and that also in that way the love of the brotherhood is cooled? These questions become the more urgent when we realize that besides the Word of the Lord and the confessions of the Church, as churches in the twenty-first century we are aware of a long church history. And precisely from that history we can learn that the church has regularly needed to withstand error and apostasy. Because she is the bride of Christ does not automatically mean that she will always remain that when she starts to participate with the world; when she no longer remains obedient to her Lord in antithesis to the world, but seeks for compromise, the synthesis with the world. Nor will she remain the bride of Christ when she begins to determine for herself how she will serve her Lord, or when she tries to justify that which the Lord rejects, or when she closes the mouth of those who stand up for the honour of God. In the history of the Church there have been more times that the believers have concluded that they had to listen to the command of the Lord in such situations, “Go out of her, my people, so that you no longer have communion with her sins and thus will not receive of her plagues.” Such a church has then degenerated into a false church. The Bible is full of self-willed assertiveness, when man raises himself up over against God, in spite of the cover of righteousness.

Silent Revolution

What has caused the churches to stray so far? We could produce a lengthy historical analysis about that which might have to start right after the Liberation. For already back then some pointed to decay. The core of the apostasy is not that unique – it is always man who wants to follow his own way in disobedience. In our time this has likely been enhanced by the unbridled prosperity with its temptations and seductions leading to an attitude of consumerism. The logic that began to dominate in the churches with regard to the assurance of faith has led to a weakening of faith education and a reduced appreciation for the armour of faith. Increasingly we have become prey to a world of pleasure and leisure, the feeling of a majority repressing respectful obedience. Emancipation and autonomous thinking also did not pass by the Church. In the last twenty years this process has executed a kind of silent revolution. A desire began to exist to strive for large numbers and to make the Bible message attractive to present-day *post*

modern man. The corresponding ideas of freedom in lifestyle, liturgy and church choice received, via *Nederlands Dagblad* and a magazine like *Bij de Tijd*, a systematic inroad into the families and were further developed by academics. Further conclusions could be seen in the broadening of membership in societies, organizations and even in our schools. All at the cost of our own reformed identity.

Armour Neglected

Most perplexing is the fact that many shepherds of God's people, our servants of the Word, did not clearly oppose these wrong tendencies. They, who had promised to oppose every error at their very beginning, allowed these things to develop in the Church by default. In this way we have learned to fit in with the world around us – by synthesis instead of antithesis. We did not receive the proper armour from our organizations or from our shepherds. Time and again the preaching was adjusted and the reality of the struggle of faith ameliorated. We wanted to be joined with other Christians and no longer drive home the consequences of the antithesis of the covenant. In the past we confessed that the oneness of life in faithful obedience demanded the armour of faith. We taught that the seed of the Church needed the armour of faith in order to live and work in a God defiant world, and then for all spheres of life. Such armour was presented in the way of the proclamation of the Word and communal study of Scripture, all within the communion of saints. Today we see an inter-church and norm-effacing message streaming into our homes via a variety of channels. We become accustomed to cooperating (church) organizations in all spheres of life where the three forms of unity do not remain intact, where there is room for the lie. As a logical extension of this we see a harmless eagerness whereby our Reformed Churches greet and embrace church communities where this lie has free reign.

The Feeling of Liberation

As churches we have gradually but fundamentally changed through this process. It is then referred to as "loosing the typically reformed edges" and "we are looking far more openly round about us". We have also become accustomed to the fact that there are differences of opinion, also about those matters that used to be referred to as 'truths of faith'. By many this produces a feeling of freedom – the tiresome feeling of always having to strive is gone. We can close ranks with other Christians. That is also how the evangelical movement, via TV and church papers, received more room in the thinking and experience of faith. By this the view on the Church of Jesus Christ and the relevance of the Confessions were clouded. How hasn't the EO (Evangelische Omroep – Evangelical Broadcast) in this way slain thousands? The youth days of the EO are attended by the masses while the sphere of synthesis is reflected in Sunday youths services. It is our own experiences that are meaningful to us. And that leads to a 'feel good' and an 'I am important' faith. Isn't this a form of self-satisfaction? It has come so far in our Reformed Churches that there are reformed shepherds who call themselves post modern in order to legitimize their uncertainties, doubts and powerlessness. Oh, how the sheep are being misguided by blind shepherds!

III. SYNODICAL DECISIONS: ZUIDHORN

Testing the Contents of the Decisions

For a broader testing of the contents of the decisions of synod in comparison with Holy Scripture we point to numerous articles in REFORMANDA as well as to the brochure *Om Trouw te Zijn* [To Be Faithful] LWVKO, 2002. With regard to a discussion about the decisions regarding the fourth commandment and divorce we also point to the brochures *Sabbat en Zondag* [Sabbath and Sunday] by W. Dijkstra and *Blijft in Mijn Liefde* [Remain in My Love] by S. de Marie. In addition one could refer to a variety of appeals including some published on www.aanvulling.nl. There are also a number of brochures available on the aforementioned web site as well as at www.reformanda.nl and www.lwvko.aanvulling.nl.

In this brochure we wish, once more, to briefly examine the decisions taken by General Synod Zuidhorn. Determinative is whether these decisions were taken in accordance with God's Word and so for the benefit of the Church. In that sense there is a difference in the "weight" of the decisions discussed. In chapter V, "Conclusions", this matter is discussed in some detail.

- *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."* (1 John 4:1).
- *"In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as its only Head."* (Art. 29, B.C.).
- *"Therefore we reject all human inventions... We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity to keep all in obedience to God."* (Art. 32, B.C.).

In light of the foregoing generally accepted rules of Scripture and confessions, we will review the ecclesiastical decisions and practices on a number of matters.

The numerical notes attached to the various decisions refer to the numbering system used on the churches' Internet site (<http://gszuidhorn.gkv.nl>) and the Acts of Synod.

III. 1 THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT (4.25, 4.26, 4.27)

Synod Leusden (1999)

At the Synod of Leusden an appeal against a decision of the Regional Synod of Utrecht was received from the Church at Nieuwegein. This appeal dealt with a sermon by Rev. D. Ophoff, then minister of Nieuwegein. Rev. D. Ophoff had raised the following points in a sermon on Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

- There is no longer a divine command of the Lord to rest on the Sunday.
- The day of rest is a good man-made institution that we should maintain as much as possible.
- Synod Leusden decided the following, in part, as recorded in the Acts, chapter 1, article 25, decision # 4, point 3:
 - that the understanding of Rev. D. Ophoff, that the day of rest is not grounded on a divine demand, may not be condemned.

Many requests for reconsideration of this decision of Synod Leusden came from a variety of sources:

- our sister churches in Australia, the FRCA;
- 3 churches
- 65 church members
- 400 concurring letters

Synod Zuidhorn (2002) made the following decisions:

1. The letters of 36 church members were declared inadmissible as they did not come with new grounds or did not confront the decisions of Leusden.
2. Not to accede to the remaining requests for reconsideration, even though valid criticism was made on parts of the grounds.
3. To call the churches in general and those requesting reconsideration in particular to seek peace and the unity of the church that has always existed in the churches between the followers of the various views regarding the fourth commandment. It pointed to the means of maintaining this peace and unity by indicating that ones opinion should not be made binding on others.

Discussion

When we review the decisions of both synods it appears that they both came to the same conclusions. Both declare that when it is preached that there is no divine command to rest on the Sunday that this does not contradict Scripture and confessions. Both synods declare such an understanding lawful.

Only the grounds differ slightly. The grounds of Zuidhorn boil down to the following:

- The appellants have not delivered incontrovertible evidence that the other understanding contradicts Scripture and confession.
- In the church there have always been two understandings about the fourth commandment.
- The decision ought not to be considered a doctrinal statement but as a response to objections to a sermon.
- The one group ought not to bind the other to its understanding.

With regard to the first ground, the appellants have provided solid evidence from Scripture, the confessions and church history that the decision of the synod is in contradiction to Scripture and confessions. For this we refer to the aforementioned appeals and brochures.

The second ground is actually no ground at all, as it is not based on Scripture or confessions, but rather on the assertion that certain opinions existed. But nowhere does synod indicate that the churches in their official declarations have ever taught this. There is no visible evidence that in the churches there has ever been room for aberrant opinion of the fourth commandment, other than a politically driven or governmentally sponsored one (1659).

Only after synod Leusden (1999) have the churches officially established the understanding of two opinions.

The third ground is also not a ground for it does not establish anything but merely speaks about the abundant breadth of the decision.

In addition it is certainly a doctrinal statement, as synod has made a statement about the teaching of Lord's Day 38 about the doctrine of the church (HC). That portion of the doctrine may from now on also be explained differently.

The worst is that synod has indirectly declared God's command, "Thou shalt not do any work" as being ceremonial. Yes, it is even so that with regard to the minister who does maintain God's command to rest it is seen as only an opinion, an understanding; one opinion over against another opinion. One can no longer preach about the fourth commandment with the words, "Thus says the Lord". No one, besides those who work in areas of emergency and mercy, can be disciplined anymore for working on the Sunday.

The synod also distances itself from what the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) has declared about the permanence (!) of the divine fourth commandment with regard to the Sunday rest and sanctity of the Sunday, something that the churches have always maintained.

Reduction

The synodical decision to accept as lawful the opinion that there is no command from the Lord to rest on the Sunday means that a divine truth, namely God's command, has been reduced to an opinion.

Before Leusden no reformed synod has ever made such a statement.

In addition, with regard to an appeal about allowing ecclesiastical meetings (Classis Rotterdam and Regional Synod Holland-South) to state that the passage "six days shall you labour and do all your work, but on the seventh day (...) you shall not do any work", Zuidhorn decided that this statement is not valid or does not need to be considered valid for the New Testament Church.

Binding

Synod said that the peace and unity in the churches would be served when no one binds another to their 'opinion'. That means that Scripture-faithful preaching on the fourth commandment will no longer be permitted. After all, preaching is indeed an activity of binding and loosening. (Lords' Day 31, HC).

Marks of the Church in Question

General

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession mentions as a summary of the marks of the true church that "it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it".

It is clear that here, with regard to the fourth commandment, we are dealing with the admission of an unscriptural teaching that synod has not rejected.

Preaching

The first mark of the true church is then in question; namely, that she maintains the pure preaching of the gospel. For isn't the unscriptural preaching with regard to the fourth commandment being allowed undisturbed?

Over against that synod asks not to declare one's own opinion in the preaching as 'thus says the Lord.' A minister is thus requested not to preach the fourth commandment with the authority of the Lord or with the call to faith and repentance, as the Lord demands this of us.

In this way the synod, in the first place, affects the character of preaching, that it must be the proclamation of the Word and not the presentation of an opinion. In the second place it devalues God's commandment to a human opinion.

Discipline

The third mark of the true church is that "it exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins."

After all, those who are disobedient to the fourth commandment cannot be disciplined by any consistory since synod has considered their practice permissible. It will only be possible to discipline someone if they do not attend the worship services but not if they work on the Sunday.

Deputies

The appointment of a committee of deputies to deal with the fourth commandment does not present an opportunity to proceed with obedience in the preaching about God's commandment within the churches. The appointed deputies are to examine a number of questions regarding the implementation of the fourth commandment in our time.

That sounds good but the fact that synod has decided that the day of rest does not depend on a divine command remains. That is something the deputies no longer have to examine.

After all, (it can not be said often enough) synod has declared that the scriptural explanation of the fourth commandment ought not to be made binding anymore.

In addition, after a careful reading of the instructions to the appointed deputies, it appears that the question of whether there have, indeed, been two lines of understanding about the command for Sunday rest in the churches for centuries already, *is not part of their mandate!* That is also clear from the decision of synod, the report of the committee and from the instructions to the deputies. *All requests for revision have been denied!*

The synod also distances itself from what the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) has declared about the permanence (!) of the divine fourth commandment with regard to the Sunday rest and sanctity of the Sunday, and what the churches have always maintained.

It is clear that in all this we are dealing with unscriptural decisions.

III. 2 THE HOLLOWING OF THE OFFICE IN THE LITURGY (The Blessing Church Member)

The understanding of deputies for the liturgy that the preaching of the Word is not necessarily the center of the worship service has not only remained unchallenged by Synod Berkel and Rodenrijs (1996) as well as Synod Leusden (1999), but continues to be active in a variety of ways.

At the General Synod of Ommen it was decided that even if a minister does not conduct a service, the salutation and the benediction might be spoken and applied in an unaltered manner. This extension was taken back by General Synod Berkel (1996) and restricted to office bearers only. General Synod Leusden validated the original decision of Ommen again with the comment:

- that any brother called by the consistory to lead a worship service, by that very fact receives the authority to pronounce the unaltered salutation, along with raised hands, in the church service.

The grounds for this decision were:

-that for a blessed salutation and benediction over the congregation in God's name there is no *specific demand that differentiates that part of the worship service from the other aspects* for which the brother leading the service is authorized: confession of sins, proclamation of grace and leading in prayer.

-by the recognition of the competence to lead in the worship service the responsible consistory naturally *considers the abilities of the selected brother* to do this work and *his acceptance in the congregation*.

Synod Zuidhorn decided not to acquiesce to the request for revision of this decision.

Preaching is the service of reconciliation. This service is entrusted to office bearers called by the Lord, and not to just anyone who has abilities and is acceptable in the congregation. The proclamation of the blessing of the Lord is done in the name of the Lord and is closely connected to the service of reconciliation.

In line with a different understanding of the preaching one comes to a different understanding with respect to the proclamation of the benediction. One no longer considers the proclamation of the benediction connected to the called office bearers, but considers every confessing member qualified who, according to the consistory, has the abilities and is accepted in the congregation (Decision General Synod Leusden). The leading of the congregation, including all the aspects of conducting a service, is done under the authority of the consistory.

This also has to do with the position of synod that the benediction, as much as leading in the worship service, has to be seen as a liturgical activity and no longer as an activity of the office. Still this understanding about preaching and the benediction is in conflict with the scriptural reformed confessions with regard to the doctrine of the three offices (ministers, elders and deacons, B.C. Art 30 & 31), and with regard to the service of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:18-20; Romans 10: 14 & 15; Canons of Dordt, Chap. 1, Art. 3). This understanding is also in conflict with the decision of General Synod Kampen 1975.

The result of this development is that the understanding of the office is hollowed out and at the same time the road is cleared for sisters to take a leadership role in the worship services. While we are pointing to a tendency, we should also state that further developments along this line will send ecclesiastical practices into an unscriptural direction.

The Synod of Zuidhorn considered the requests for reconsideration of the decisions of Leusden unfounded.

The character of preaching and its place in the worship service has been affected. Also this belongs to the content of what we believe concerning the true and the false church. These decisions will particularly continue their affect in the normal Sunday worship services.

III. 3 UNSCRIPTURAL HYMNS (4.27)

Nearly all the objections to the 121 permitted songs out of the “Liedboek voor de Kerken” as well as to the method of testing them have been rejected.

Included in the decisions of Synod were the following:

- to agree with the objections to songs 113, 147, 264 and 301 and not to include them in the list of permitted songs for use in the worship services; and
- to reject the objections to all the songs except those in decision 1 and thus to permit them for use in the worship services.

The objection that the excessive quantity of new songs would reduce the usage of the Psalms was not honored by the Synod. Even though until 1984 the churches had been very restrained with regard to hymns in general but in particular with regard to the freely composed songs. The Psalms that the Lord has given His people to sing as His own Word have always been considered superior by far to freely composed songs. Even more, in this regard, we follow the Lord Christ who, just before His atoning suffering on the cross, sang from the Psalms and did not consider a new song necessary!

The Synod has merely rejected four songs.

The criticism with regard to dozens of songs dealt with:

1. The doctrine of common grace.
2. Horizontalism
3. Unscriptural magical re-living of salvation occurrences from the past.
4. Liberation theology
5. Omission/confusion/minimizing of election/covenant/living out of the promises.
6. Omission/confusion/minimizing of the good fight of faith.
7. Omission/confusion/minimizing of sin/covenant unfaithfulness/antithesis.
8. Omission/confusion/minimizing of atonement through satisfaction.
9. Unscriptural magical elements in the sacraments
10. Names for God that can not be found in His Word.
11. Poetic images and connections that can not be referenced to Scripture
12. Omissions in the rhyming of Scripture passages, thereby diminishing the message of the Word of God.
13. Mystical poetic language that does not fit with the original Scriptural text.

When a song is not void of ambiguity and in accordance with God's Word, but brings heresy, or if heresy is contained in it; and when such heresy is pointed to or assumed in such a song, then God's Word says that we may *not* sing it. (Romans 14:23, Titus 2:7, 8) In church we sing before the face of God. The words that we take upon our lips must be pleasant for our Lord. (Philippians 4: 8, 9, 18; Romans 15:16-19; Hebrews 12: 28) Our spiritual songs must also contain words that are fitting to the holiness of our Lord. (1 Peter 4:11) Our spiritual songs must come straight from that Word that rules our mind and our heart. (Colossians 3: 16, 17) Every offering, including our offerings of praise must be pure and irreproachable. (Philippians 2: 12-18; Hebrews 13:15)

The many criticisms and appeals containing elaborate references to Scripture have almost all been rejected. Nearly in every case where ambiguities were pointed out, they were ignored. Besides, when songs were permitted no consideration was given to the existing conscientious objections of the concerned.

For the sake of peace in the churches it was decided that at the next synod no new songs from the 'Liedbook' would be permitted. But the 131 'parked', untested songs are allowed to be used in the worship services, all be it with reservation. Another 40 have also been added to the list.

The conclusion must be that the conscious ambiguity that was in the mind of the poets in false, ecumenical churches as they were producing the songs for the Liedboek, and that has been pointed out by the requests for revision, have been openly negated by the synod. Whereas the noted objections have not been convincingly refuted by scriptural clarity, the consciences of believers have been affected. Indeed, thanksgiving to the Lord for the singing in the worship services can no longer be communal. (1 Cor. 10: 28-30) In this way the offering of the praise of our lips has been defiled. Also the unity in glorifying and praising the Lord, and therefore the communion of saints has been consciously broken by synod (Romans 14:20-23; Romans 15: 5 & 6).

III. 4 REPORT ON DIVORCE (3.15)

A detailed report about the problem of divorce was delivered at synod.

New Ethic

The report by the committee on divorce begins with a radical obedience to the Word of God and the once delivered "I do". In the same report, however, there is also a veering off from this scriptural direction by:

- (a) Situational ethics (proportionalism): human circumstances such as 'the hardness of heart' and the 'spiritual capacity to bear' are permitted to determine when one can be released from the seventh commandment. In this way, in fact, God's command is rendered powerless.
- (b) Congregational Ethics: The congregation, in Christian freedom, is permitted to establish new rules that are different than the commands of God and Christ. In this way human opinions are placed above the Word of God. This is based on an analogy of 1 Corinthians 7:15.
- (c) Making the commandments of God relative to the context of Christ's teaching and the 'style of the kingdom'.
- (d) Undermining of scriptural discipline in matters relating to sin against the seventh commandment by referring to church discipline as 'placing under the law'.

This is how the report distinguishes itself by simultaneously expressing a 'yes' and 'no' toward the Word of God. In this way one comes into conflict with God's Word (Exodus 20: 14; Deut. 5: 18; Matthew 5: 17-32; 19: 1-12; James 2: 11), the confessions (B.C. arts. 7, 29, 30, 32; H.C. Q &

A 91, 92, 108, 109, 115), the Church Order (arts. 72 & 76) and the statements of Synod Hoogeveen, Acts, Art. 314, pp. 330-340.

The Spreading of Unscriptural Thinking

Synod should have rejected this report that directs away from obedience to all the commandments of the Lord from the bottom of their heart (Art. 7, BC). In stead it continued on with the report. It decided to mandate the deputies to establish a broader awareness in the churches and to popularize the discussion so that the matter could be 'negotiated' at synod.

In addition synod introduced, via this report, an unlawful explanation of scripture whereby the congregation is permitted, on the basis of a new situation and context, to make interpretations that deviate from the content of God's Word. In this way the authority of God's Word is affected even though, in fact, Scripture should fundamentally be its own interpreter (cf. B. Congregational Ethics).

This is how an unscriptural manner of thinking is gradually spread in the churches.

The synod has forsaken its task to keep the churches safe by the Word of God!

For a more in-depth discussion of this report, its foundational ideology and the decision of synod we refer to the previously mentioned LWVKO-brochure, *Blijft in mijn liefde – het bewaren van Gods geboden in deze tijd (Remain in My Love – the maintenance of Gods commandments in our time)*.

III. 5 CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN REGIONS WHERE THERE IS A CRISIS (5.7)

General Synod Leusden (1999) has decided that a serving chaplain may administer the Lord's Supper under exceptional situations in areas of crisis or war to military personnel entrusted to his spiritual care, provided that:

- in the meeting the character of a Christian congregation are maintained;
- he invites only those who are eligible to attend in their own congregation;
- he points them to their personal responsibility regarding doctrine and lifestyle.

The synod of Zuidhorn, in reaction to appeals on this matters, responded by saying, among others, in decision 5:

- to change the decision of General Synod Leusden 1999, Acts, art. 70, decision 3, as follows:

To mandate the deputies to guide and advise the serving chaplain that in exceptional circumstances of crisis and war he must bear the final responsibility regarding the celebration and administration of the Lord's Supper when requested and opportunity presents, provided that:

1. in the meeting the character of a Christian congregation is honored, namely, that it is a community on the basis of God's Word that is subject to mutual oversight and discipline;
2. he invites only those about whom he is convinced that they, in their own Christian congregation, have been admitted to the Lord's Supper;
 - that they agree with us in the 'fundamentals' of the Christian religion;
 - that they are irreproachable in life style;
 - that with an eye to the participation in the Lord's Supper they are prepared to submit to one another's oversight and discipline.

Synod is convinced, so it says, that in this manner the holiness of the Lord's Supper table remains guaranteed.

The main, and in fact only, difference between Leusden and Zuidhorn is that in the revised decision of Zuidhorn mention is made of *oversight and discipline of one another*.

The most important complaint against the decision of Leusden was that the decision of General Synod was in conflict with articles 60 and 61 of the Church Order.

In article 60 of the Church Order, we, as Reformed Churches have agreed that the consistories will permit to the Lord's Supper only those who have publicly professed the reformed faith, and members of sister churches when they present a good attestation.

In an area of crisis or war there *is not a consistory that can exercise oversight* and where one can examine another.

In article 61 of the Church Order the churches have agreed, on the ground of God's Word, that the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in the *public worship service, under the authority of the elders*. In an area of crisis or war this is not possible.

As a result of this previously mentioned decision of the General Synod of Leusden the responsibility of the holiness of the Lord's Supper table rests with the individual attendee. "Those who confess their faith and live and God-fearing life." That sounds good. But where is the congregation? Where are the office bearers? There is not a single mention of oversight or a congregation. And yet the conclusion is a complete Lord's Supper? That is in conflict with Scripture (1 Corinthians 11: 23-29).

In the report about the discussion on this decision mention is made of "a new group of believers". In the 2nd ground of the decision of the General Synod of Leusden mention is made of an "emergency church". The Reformed Churches do not recognize such an entity. They can not be drawn from Scripture either. Such terms are vague and in practice they will be applied subjectively. Anyone who according to themselves confesses the Christ according to the Scripture will be considered a member of such an "emergency congregation".

Zuidhorn has now added to it the need for elder oversight. But what does that consist of? How does this function? Still there is no mention of elders who see to the holiness of the table. Still there is no mention of a worship service in accordance with articles 60 and 61 of the Church Order and in accordance with Scripture.

Without oversight for the Church via office bearers and celebration in the midst of a lawful congregation it is not possible to vindicate the holiness of the Lord's Supper. We are of the opinion, then, that this decision derogates the holiness of the Lord of the Supper, our Lord Christ. The decision also does not do justice to who does and who does not belong to the church as Lord's Supper communion.

In addition, we are of the opinion that this decision fits on the road towards a more open Lord's Supper celebration as that is being practiced in other church federations and is also gradually starting to take place in Reformed Churches. In this way the real norm for admission to the Lord's Supper table lies in the personal witness of the attendee while the special offices are left out of the picture.

III. 6 THE MARRIAGE FORM (4.21)

The new Marriage Form emphasizes better than the old Form that the care for the family is a matter that concerns both husband and wife. But it pays insufficient attention to the fact that the Lord has given husband and wife different abilities and tasks. This applies in particular to the tasks and responsibilities within the family, which the Lord in His Word gives to husband and wife in various ways. Of these the Form says only that they carry them jointly.

Synod Zuidhorn's answer to these objections is: "It has not been demonstrated that in the whole of Scripture the diversity between husband and wife is of special significance."

In a world in which, partly through unscriptural emancipation, the distinction between the roles of husband and wife is growing dim this is an irresponsible shortcoming which does an injustice to Scripture.

1. It fails to mention that the LORD made the woman a "*helper*" for the man, "*for the sake of the man*", and not the other way round (Genesis 2:18, 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, 1 Timothy 2:13). The LORD makes the woman the "*glory*" of man (1 Corinthians 11:7). He does this in His own special manner, and indicates immediately what the relationship between husband and wife is. That approach is different from that of the Form, which speaks of marriage as "sharing life". On that basis the teaching in the letter to the Ephesians which seeks to promote an understanding of the different tasks in family, church and society, loses its specific application.

Ephesians 5:21 does not at all speak about mutual subordination within marriage. This verse is rather an introduction to a variety of relationships in authority (husband-wife, parents-children, master-slave) expanded upon in the next verses. Submitting to one another means that the one submits to the other, and *not*: just like the other submits to the one.

2. The primary orientation of the woman towards the care for the family (1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Timothy 5:10,14, Titus 2:4,5) and the social task which derives from the man's primary responsibilities are omitted (Psalm 128). God's Word does not merely place restrictions on the possibilities for development of the woman. To the contrary, it enables both marriage life and family life to blossom as opposed to individualistic career development. In her position of mother the woman contributes to the very important task of training the children in godliness. In the right proportion to, and within the primary task of the woman (paid) work outside the house is also possible (Acts 16:14, Proverbs 31). The latter Bible passage shows how a woman is real 'helper' through attending to the housekeeping and the children's upbringing and in her skills of creating a 'home' for the family. All her activities that are mentioned have as their basis her being the helper of her husband (Genesis 2:18). The more the woman is helper of her husband and the husband is the head of his wife, the more intimate and solid their marriage bond becomes, and the more may they expect God's blessing in their family and in the church (Psalm 128:4-6).

The General Synod of Zuidhorn has simply rejected the objections also in this matter. The responsibility and care for the family have completely become a joint task. Husband and wife have in their family life no distinctive tasks.

III. 7 THE New Forms for the Celebration of Holy Supper and for the Ordinarium (4.20, 4.13)

The General Synod of Leusden 1999 approved the use of three new Forms for the celebration of Holy Supper. Objections were lodged against these, and the General Synod of Zuidhorn decided:

1. not to agree with the objections against the indicated formulations in the Forms, and
2. to reject the objections against the decisions about these Forms.

Missing parts

In Synod Leusden's decisions, the use of the Forms is left entirely to the discretion of the local Church Council. Though it is *the intention*, as well as *the expectation*, that the two old Forms – and in particular the longer one, will be used a few times each year, that is not mandatory. A

Church Council is free in its choice. It is likely that as time goes on the new, short Forms will be used more and more, and this trend is already becoming visible here and there.

The new Forms (3, 4, and 5 in the liturgical booklet) do injustice to a proper, scriptural celebration of Holy Supper. The parts dealing with “zelfbeproeving” (self-examination) and “uitnodiging en terugwijzing” (invitation and rejection) are missing in Forms III and V, and receive also very little attention in Form IV. The “onderwijzing” (instruction) has become very brief. These parts are essential for a proper and responsible Holy Supper celebration.

Awareness of guilt and sin

The new Forms are completely directed at the proclamation of grace, at thankfulness and at praise. This fits in with the trend in the churches whereby awareness of guilt and sin are no longer topics of discussion and the liturgy is increasingly concentrating on personal experiences of thankfulness and personal expressions of praise and honour. We still seem prepared to acknowledge our deliverance and thankfulness but not our misery. But if we are no longer interested in our guilt and misery, how can we ever retain the correct view on our deliverance and how can we ever show God our thankfulness in the right manner?

The Synod of Zuidhorn indicates that the missing elements *can* be given a place in the liturgy in another way, but this is not *mandatory*.

We must therefore conclude that the new Forms lead to impoverishment in the celebration of the Holy Supper and do harm to the honour which is due to our Lord Christ.

The ordinarium

The Synod of Zuidhorn has also given its judgment about the introduction of the so-called ordinarium-liturgy.

The ordinarium is a manner of liturgy which ‘leads’ the congregation to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper by way of certain formulations, texts and songs. There is no prescribed form for the ordinarium. Within the decontrolled liturgy the officiating liturgist has every opportunity for personal initiative. And there is certainly no preaching! During the service the believing church-member is led step-by-step to the climax of eating of the bread and drinking of the wine.

Separated from the Word

The Holy Supper, like Baptism, was instituted by the Lord Christ Himself, to seal His Word. Therefore the Holy Supper does not stand alone, but is closely connected to the preaching of God’s Word. The Holy Supper itself has no power, but derives its value through being tied to the Gospel, through the sealing of God’s promises in Christ.

The ordinarium-liturgy removes the bond between Word and Sacrament. The Sacrament begins to lead its own, almost mystical, life. It takes us back to the time before the Reformation, when also in the Roman Catholic Church the mass had acquired a holy and sanctifying value *in itself*.

The ordinarium-liturgy also destroys the character of the worship service as ‘covenant dialogue’, whereby first the Lord speaks to His people who listen reverently, followed by the congregation answering the Lord in faith. In the ordinarium listening in faith is just not on. Like the new Forms for Holy Supper, it directs all the attention to expressions of gratitude and praise.

The General Synod of Zuidhorn has rejected all the objections against this ordinarium.

III. 8 THE USE OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS IN THE WORSHIP SERVICE (4.4)

There is nowadays great demand for a Bible translation in present-day language for use in the church service. The *Groot Nieuws* (1996) version is becoming increasingly popular.

The General Synod of Leusden (1999) decided:

1. not to approve *Groot Nieuws* (1996) for use in the ordinary church service, and

2. pending an ecclesiastical decision about the *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*, to leave the decision whether to use *Groot Nieuws* (1996) in exceptional circumstances to the local churches.

The General Synod of Zuidhorn decided in response to the objections that were raised:

Decision 1:

that there is a lack of clarity in the decisions of Leusden 1999 Acts Article 46, as well as contradictions, and to declare those decisions lapsed.

Two of the grounds for this decision were:

Ground 2: The General Synod of Leusden states (Decision 1, Ground 1) that *Groot Nieuws* was not systematically examined on the quality of its contents and on reliability, and uses that as the ground for its decision not to approve its use in the ordinary church service. If however no examination was made, neither a negative nor a positive decision can be taken. In the absence of an examination there are also no grounds to allow its use only in special situations either on a temporary basis or subject to conditions.

Ground 4: the General Synod of Leusden left the decision whether to use *Groot Nieuws* (1996) 'in exceptional circumstances' to the local churches. It remains unclear why such exceptional circumstances require a general-synodical¹ decision. It is also not clear which criteria, different from those for an ordinary church service, must apply for use of a Bible translation in such situations.

Decision 2:

(a) to instruct Deputies 'Kerkrecht en Kerkorde' (Church law and Church Order) to consult with Deputies for Bible translation:

1. on examining (in particular the 'kerkrechtelijke'²) questions applicable to the ecclesiastical appraisal of Bible translations, and the general-synodical approval of a translation for use in the churches including the demarcation of authority in this respect;
2. on identifying which decisions need to be made at general-synodical level regarding the use of Bible translations in the churches in the present-day situation and during the coming years;
3. on reporting to the next Synod.

(b) pending this examination, to leave the decision whether to use *Groot Nieuws* to the local churches.

Dynamic equivalent

There are serious objections against the use of *Groot Nieuws* in the worship service. This translation was made using the dynamic-equivalent method of translation. This translation method has been strongly criticised, a.o by Prof. Dr. J. van Bruggen. The danger of this method has been pointed out clearly in the circles of the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting.³

Dynamic equivalence means that the text in the receptor language need not necessarily be equal to the source language (the original), but it should be of the same 'value'. Today's reader or hearer (receiver) must be enabled to comprehend the same as the original reader or hearer, so that he can react in a similar manner.

Exegesis of the text (its interpretation) is an inseparable part of the translation process. It is important that today's reader and hearer does not receive exactly the same message as the people in Bible times, but that its *intent* is brought across so that today's bible-reader can *react* in the same manner. The intent of a Bible passage and the manner of representing that intent

¹ at General Synod level

² 'kerkrechtelijke' questions = questions relating to the rules (laws) of the church

³ Reformed Bible Society

has everything to do with what a person himself believes. Personal interpretation and modern Bible criticism have a bearing on the text. The dynamic equivalent method very obviously produces more than a translation; it is partly interpretation.

Theological background

This interpretation is based on a particular vision on man and on the Bible. In that vision the Bible is not God's revealed and authoritative Word. Briefly, it means that the old biblical message is no longer understandable by modern man. A Bible translation must therefore make that message transparent again. Instead of making sure that the message is in harmony with its Sender, it is attuned to the receiver of the message.

This vision has also a theological basis. Its starting point is the incarnation of Christ. The Word became flesh. And (as the theorists ramble on) it is therefore subjected to all the limitations typical of *human* communication "because it is part of a time-bound cultural situation." In other words: God's speaking is time-bound and culture-bound. The translation must therefore fine-tune that Word for the time and culture of the receiver. It follows that the dynamic-equivalent vision of translation has no respect left for the authority of God's Word.

Doubtful manuscripts

The basis of the 'translation' is, moreover, defective. For the translators based their work on a doubtful original. There are different versions in Hebrew and in Greek of the original text of the Bible. Up to the end of the nineteenth century the theologians were almost unanimous which version was the right one. A great majority of Bible translations are based on that version. Then came the time when another version was promoted, a version which was considered less reliable but more to the liking of the strongly developing Bible criticism. Modern, dynamic-equivalent translations are based on that 'new' version of the original text. This is not accidental.

Un-reliable

Groot Nieuws was translated using the wrong manuscripts, and on the basis of principles which are completely false and unacceptable for faithful people who want to be loyal to God's Word, who want to maintain God's Word and refuse to insert their own interpretation into that Word. From this we may conclude that *Groot Nieuws* is unreliable and unsuitable for use in the worship service.

Objections not removed

Decision 2 of the General Synod of Leusden, which allows the Church Councils to do as they please, was not good. Synod Zuidhorn's revision of that decision is therefore a positive move. But it is a pity that the issue of the use of Bible translations was deferred. We consider our ministers – expert theologians – quite capable of evaluating the above arguments. That has however not happened. To the contrary, Synod's instruction to Deputies concentrates in particular on '*kerkrechtelijke*' questions and not on the contents of the translation! Moreover, the Church Councils are free until the next Synod to use *Groot Nieuws*. And our conclusion must be that the fundamental objections against *Groot Nieuws* are still valid.

New Bible translation

It is obviously important that our churches cooperate in a Bible translation which uses present day language. Initiatives in that direction deserve every support, *provided* they uphold faithfulness to God's Word. In this connection it is good to realise that also the new Bible translation, currently being prepared, is based on a similar somewhat adjusted translation method, and using the same doubtful original text. Within our Gereformeerde Kerken the completion of that translation (probably in 2004) is receiving wide-ranging appreciation. It is widely assumed that that translation is going to be used in our churches. It is clear that the

Gereformeerde Kerken are badly suffering from weakening discernment, and that this has caused the watchfulness on responsible use of Bible translations to disappear.

III. 9 REPRESENTATION IN CHURCH SERVICES OF NON-REFORMED CHURCHES

The General Synod of Ommen 1993 made a decision about the official representation of Gereformeerde Kerken at official events in other churches. The Synod decided that this may be done only when there is 'contact' with such churches at either the national or the local level, and this contact has unification as its aim. This representation can take the form of attending a worship service of those churches, for example at the ordination of a new minister.

This decision was appealed at the Synod of Zuidhorn. One of the appellants asked that the decision be left to the discretion of the local Church Council, while another letter opposed especially that request.

Though this matter is one that happens rarely, the background to the discussion is an unscriptural and un-reformed view on the church; and it is regrettable that Ommen's decision is still operative, because attendance at a non-Gereformeerde church service by official representatives of the bond of churches⁴ opens the door for each church-member to apply this practice to his own church attendance. This conflicts with the scriptural injunction to come to church where the Lord calls, and to separate from those who do not belong to the church even though authorities and edicts would forbid it (Belgic Confession Article 28, Article 65 of the Church Order, Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 38).

III. 10 ECCLESIASTICAL UNITY WITH THE CHRISTELIJKE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN (9.3)

The Synod of Zuidhorn decided regarding the unification with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken:

to express thankfulness for the growth in consensus, and continue on the way to ecclesiastical unity;

that there is merit in recommending the federative growth model⁵

to instruct deputies to cooperate with deputies from the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in examining a number of issues, such as changing situations and practices in both bonds of churches in respect of Church Order, liturgy, different Bible translations, Psalms and hymns, modified church services, how the churches must view publications that disclaim the authority of Scripture, the contacts with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken, the convening of office-bearers conferences, pulpit exchange and the perforation of local church boundaries.⁶

Unfaithfulness

Not long after the Liberation the Gereformeerde Kerken approached the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken for the purpose of establishing church union in accordance with the command of the Lord. But in reality those churches showed, already at that time, that for them the obedience to God's Word is not the only way. In order to preserve the unity in their own churches they had deviated in their view on the church from what the Lord says in that regard. It was not God's Word that determined their actions, but the hardness of the heart. Their approach

⁴ these are church services to which representatives of the churches are invited by churches with whom there is dialogue *even though there is no unity (as yet)*, or by government authorities (for example on the occasion of the crown prince's marriage)

⁵ growing unity between the bonds of churches

⁶ for a description refer to a following section

demonstrated the attitude that in this day and age one must occasionally be satisfied with the maximum that can be attained in a given situation.

We may therefore conclude that the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken are unfaithful in respect of Christ's church-gathering work. But there is also unfaithfulness in respect of upholding what these churches confess about the church – the preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

It was also that view, and it was also that manner of practising their Confession in the Articles 27-29 of the Belgic Confession, that has made the appeal of our Synod of Arnhem 1981⁷ ineffective.

No longer an obstruction

The General Synod of Leusden 1999 decided, in thankfulness for the growth in consensus, to continue on the way to ecclesiastical unity, even though Deputies for Ecclesiastical unity are instructed to pay attention to "... changing situations and practices ... and how the churches must view publications that disclaim the authority of Scripture."

So there need to be further discussions. But as a result of this decision the existing differences with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, which on scriptural grounds were once seen as obstacles to real unity in the truth, have now become matters that merely require attention. They're mediocre things, and no longer form an obstacle on the way to unification.

Bible criticism

The revision requests submitted to Synod Zuidhorn mention Bible criticism within the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, the perforation of local church boundaries permitted by synodical regulations, and their close ties with local Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken.

All these were trivialised by Synod.

The fact remains, however, that the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken have neglected to publicly reject the heresy of Bible criticism as it was tolerated in the past (Prof. Dr. B.J. Oosterhof and Prof. Dr. J.P. Versteeg). The Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken have never taken disciplinary steps against these two professors.

Moreover, the Bible-critical views of Dr. B. Loonstra were also not rejected. These views are published in his three books: *De geloofwaardigheid van de Bijbel* (The credibility of the Bible (1994), *De Bijbel rechtdoen* (Doing justice to the Bible (1999), and *Zo goed en zo kwaad* (?) (2000), published by Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer. In order to make the Bible 'credible', and therefore acceptable for post-modern man, it must no longer be taken literally in every respect. If cultural differences, scientific insight, and 'demonstrated' contradictions in Scripture obstruct the understanding of Bible texts, these must be taken metaphorically, figuratively, or symbolically. Not every Bible message has validity for our time - see for example the role of the woman in Paul's letters. It is up to today's congregation to make her own contemporary interpretation of God's commandments. Does it make sense, and is the congregation able to perceive an unmistakable relationship with 'love'? Here is a far-reaching adaptation of God's Word to man's perception and man's experience of his environment. Dr. Loonstra's Bible-critical opinions are a gross subversion of the authority of Scripture. Although this matter was discussed with him in a private meeting and he published (in *De Wekker*) a toned-down version of some of his earlier statements, his Bible-critical conviction remains unchanged.

We must therefore judge of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken that there is persistence in unscriptural tolerance.

⁷ Having rejected the Bible-critical views that were tolerated within the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken as being in conflict with Scripture and the Confessions, Synod Arnhem 1981 called on the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken to chose in favour of the truth and against the lie.

Perforation of congregational boundaries

This is what people do when they don't feel at ease, or disagree, with the doctrine in their own congregation, and therefore join a congregation in another place which suits their 'views'. Though the Christelijke Gereformeerde Synod acknowledges that this is an unscriptural practice and is trying to contain it somewhat (but without success), it persists in tolerating it. This situation confirms the sectarian character of these churches.

Cooperation with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken

There is close cooperation, and occasional local union, with Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. This church federation tolerates false doctrine (the teaching of Rev Telder, adult baptism, open Lord's Supper Table, Bible criticism), and does not insist on a 'binding' Confession. Also, several congregations have admitted women into the office. Despite these objections the Christelijke Gereformeerde major assemblies still grant approval to local churches for close cooperation with Nederlands Gereformeerde congregations. While these are issues that concern a different bond of churches, we are becoming increasingly accountable for them because of the growing intensity of ecclesiastical unity.

Local ecclesiastical unity

Synod has rejected all the requests for revision of the decisions that approve of local close cooperation with a Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk including the communion of Word and Sacrament. Despite the appeal of Synod Arnhem 1981 (which has still not been withdrawn and which has still not been complied with by the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken) Synod has progressed further on the way to ecclesiastical unity. Though all the Church Councils and all major assemblies of 'our churches' are in duty bound to uphold these decisions, no one takes any notice, and the Bible-critical heresies within the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken are ignored. The Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken have not changed, but we, the Gereformeerde Kerken have. This makes us co-accountable for the deviation from Scripture and the Confessions in the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken.

Accountability

The serious truth holds also here, that each church and each church-member is jointly accountable for deviation of Scripture and the Confessions. That will become the inescapable reality for each member of the local church which puts ecclesiastical unity with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken into practice by way of joint church services, including even the celebration of Holy Supper. These members are already now in a moral predicament when the Church Council calls them to come to church and they wholeheartedly believe that that worship service is not being called and held in accordance with the norms of Scripture and the Confessions. To refrain from attending such worship services is for these members no more than a temporary solution.

The question arises whether they have the duty to meet, possibly with other church members, in a house congregation rather than attend the service called by the Church Council, which they must reject as unscriptural.

III. 11 ECCLESIASTICAL UNITY WITH THE NEDERLANDS GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN

The General Synod of Ommen (1993) instructed Deputies for ecclesiastical unity (appointed in 1990) to examine "whether there are possibilities for establishing contact with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken, and if so, in what manner." That instruction resulted in a series of six talks with the Committee for contact and dialogue of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken.

The outcome was disappointing. The Synod of Berkel en Rodenrijs (1996) concluded “with sadness and great disappointment” to see no meaningful possibility for beginning dialogue or even for continuing the exploratory contacts.

Three years later the Synod of Leusden (1999) was able to conclude only “that within the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken there is still too much freedom in their view on the doctrine of Scripture as it is summarised in the Confessions.” Like Berkel, Leusden saw no possibilities for dialogue. But it did instruct Deputies to invite the representatives of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken for an informative discussion (Acts, Article 84).

Incidental exceptions

It was surprising that in the document *General Framework for local dialogues* this Synod (Leusden) decided that

- “the decision to officiate in each others church services and of reciprocal admission to Holy Supper will be taken only, if this concerns churches with whom there is dialogue at the national level, and whose national assemblies have mutually declared that they stand, or want to stand, on the foundation of God’s Word and the Reformed Confessions. *With approval from the Classis and Deputies for Article 49 of the Church Order, an exception can be made in minor cases for a Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerk.*” (Acts, Article 86, decision 2.8).

Synod Zuidhorn received many objections from churches and church members against this exception clause (printed in italics also in the Acts). Fortunately, Synod Zuidhorn decided to withdraw it, with expression of regret to the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken for the wavering course in this matter.

A new direction

Synod Zuidhorn had to deal also with the report of Deputies for ecclesiastical unity. How did the discussion go on Deputies’ results relating to Leusden’s mandate?

Well, if Leusden was still talking about sadness and disappointment, it was thankfulness that dominated in Zuidhorn. This is very obvious from Synod’s decision 4 in this agenda item. It records that a letter will be sent to the next National Meeting of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken

- a. expressing thankfulness for the fact that the meeting following the General Synod of Leusden led to good discussions in which progress was made in respect of mutual understanding;
- b. expressing thankfulness for the decision of the National Meeting in Amersfoort 2001 to conduct an internal study on how to view God’s Word and the Confessions, and in particular on the question how the churches can exercise care for the required unity in doctrine;
- c. encouraging the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken to provide clarity on the question whether there is a basis for discussions that seek to restore ecclesiastical unity.

Doctrinal freedom and independentism

There is more news to report. Synod is also of the opinion that we must be prepared to learn from the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. That decision is added as the fifth ‘Ground’ to Decision 3, which defines Synod’s new mandate for Deputies for ecclesiastical unity.

With decisions like these, General Synod has chosen a course which can lead only to disaster. It speaks of thankfulness even before these churches have shown any evidence of willingness to repent. The freedom they take with respect to the Confessions remains, and the spirit of independentism is put in control. It means that not only Bible criticism is tolerated, but also deviation from the Canons of Dort, the practice of some congregations to ordain women in office, admission of children to Holy Supper, and adult baptism. These are clear deviations from Scripture and the Confessions.

A few remarks about Synod's expressed willingness to learn from the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. Within the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken the cry for ecclesiastical unity with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken is gathering strength. In some places this unity is already being exercised in one form or another. That means that the spirit of independentism is already at work in the churches. The same is true for Bible criticism and for freedom in respect to the Confessions. In this regard there is no need for us to learn anything from the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. Synod would have served the churches better by taking position against these evil issues, and by discontinuing further contact with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken.

III. 12 FOREIGN CHURCHES (10.10)

Regarding the contacts with foreign churches, we wish to pay attention to those with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA). General Synod of Zuidhorn has decided to establish a sister relation with this church.

The Synods of Ommen (1993) and Leusden (1999) decided that it should be the aim to establish a sister relation with the PCEA. The ground for this decision was that in respect of its doctrine, service, church government and discipline the PCEA must be acknowledged to be a true church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our churches have had a sister relation with the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) for many years. These Australian sister churches urged the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken not to establish a sister relation with the PCEA on the grounds that the PCEA deviates from God's Word and the Confessions in three respects, which concern differences of opinion and ecclesiastical practice.

Ignoring the difficulties between our sister churches (FRCA) and the PCEA, Synod Leusden (1999) still decided to establish a sister relation (Acts, Article 89).

Objections

Synod Zuidhorn received many objections against this decision, as well as requests for revision. The appellants claimed that:

- The PCEA admits ministers from other churches (for example Baptist) to the pulpit;
- Non-PCEA members are admitted to the celebration of Holy Supper on the basis of their own testimony;
- Our sister churches are unable on these grounds to establish a sister relation with the PCEA.
- and they argued:
 - Scripture teaches that the whole counsel of God must be proclaimed. But a Baptist is unable to do that in respect to the covenant. The Confession says that the purity of the preaching is a mark of the church of Christ (Article 29 of the Belgic Confession).
 - Scripture teaches that the wrath of God comes upon the congregation when church discipline is neglected. The church confesses that the Table of the Lord must be kept holy. The administration of the Sacraments is also a mark of the church of Christ (Article 29 of the Belgic Confession).

Synod Zuidhorn still decided not to grant the requests for revision. The objections were rejected on formal grounds, even though this matter concerns Scripture and the Confessions.

We must therefore conclude that Zuidhorn's decision to enter into a sister relation with the PCEA conflicts with what we as churches confess in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. Even though the decisions of Ommen and Berkel were theoretically of the same nature, it was Leusden,

ignoring Ommen's and Berkel's reasons for not (as yet) establishing a sister relation, who took the first concrete step to a sister relation, and it was Zuidhorn who confirmed this. In doing so, Zuidhorn did not only proceed further, but also placed our sister churches in Australia in a difficult position.

III. 13 THE BOND OF CHURCHES AND MARKING OUT ITS COURSE

General Synod of Zuidhorn also discussed the application of Articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order.

Together, in good order

Article 1 of our Church Order states why it is important that the churches together have a Church Order. It is quite simple: In the church of God everything must be done in good order, and in accordance with the words of Scripture (1 Cor 14:40): "Let all things be done decently and in order"; and (Col 2:5): "... I rejoice to see your good order"; and (1 Cor 14:33): "for God is not the author of confusion but of peace."

It is for those reasons that the churches together have adopted a set of rules, to serve order and peace in a christian and scriptural manner, and to strengthen the common unity. Those rules are based on what Scripture teaches about church government and living together in communion. Although many of those rules cannot be found directly in the Bible, they do have a scriptural basis. Without the rules of the Church Order it would become very difficult to really live together, and practically impossible to show how Christ is served in the bond of churches.

Rules for the church service

Article 65 of the Church Order⁸ reads: "The consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's day. The churches shall abide by the Orders of Worship approved by General Synod."

Article 67 of the Church Order reads: "In the church services the Psalms shall be sung in the rhymed version adopted by General Synod and further the hymns approved by General Synod." The Church Order says: Two church services. And we meet in the manner agreed upon, because we concluded that this is how we do the will of the Lord. We will also sing the Psalms and songs agreed upon.

Marking out the course

These Articles of the Church Order are increasingly regarded as repressive. Some congregations already deviate from them. There the church services are being 'opgeleukt'⁹ with features and songs which definitely were not approved by Synod. An odd congregation wants to have the freedom to no longer arrange two worship services each Sunday. General opinion has it that one service per Sunday is preferable; while its liturgy should also be quite different. Synod therefore made a decision about the application of these two Articles of the Church Order. This decision has been documented in *Marking out the course in respect to the application of Articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order*.

The Articles themselves will not be amended or abolished. But Synod does indicate the manner in which we must apply these Articles. This '*Marking out the course*' is a continuation of the direction taken by Synod Leusden, which already heard pleas for a more liberal application of Church Order Articles.

⁸ Note that the numbering of Articles in the Dutch Church Order, as well as the precise text of the Articles, is not necessarily the same as in the Church Orders of their sister churches in English speaking countries

⁹ 'opgeleukt' has no English equivalent. Since 'leuk' = pleasant, opgeleukt may be taken as 'made pleasant'

General frameworks

General Synod concluded, first of all, that Synod decisions limit themselves to establishing general frameworks. Church Order Articles are not intended to be binding rules, but rather the frameworks whose details can be provided by the Church Councils themselves. There must be no compulsion to adhere to precise Orders of Liturgy. The existing Orders serve as “*examples*”, and are “*recommended*.” The churches “*may*” make use of them.

An added note of clarification repeats that the adopted Orders of Worship mentioned in Article 65 present possible *options* for operating a reformed worship service. “*These Orders must therefore not be understood as a kind of procedure or scenario of what is allowed to happen in a church service and how it must be done.*”

There will be no other rules for the liturgy. Article 65 must from now on be explained and used in this manner.

The consequence is that Article 65 has lost its value, and becomes void.

It seems that Synod realised this as well. The note of clarification mentions that Deputies for Ecclesiastical Law and Church Order may be instructed to draft new Church Order Articles for the liturgy in the spirit of the new direction. It fits in with Deputies’ mandate to consider whether the Church Order as a whole needs revision, and to prepare the necessary proposals.

Local responsibility

It is the intention that the Church Councils organise the worship services in a responsible manner. Synod does not want to just make room for all kinds of practices.

The note of clarification explains therefore what ‘responsible’ means: In obedience to Scripture, in unity with (the liturgy of) all the saints in heaven and on earth, in accordance with the Reformed Confessions, *making due allowance for contemporary lifestyles, local contexts and the character of the local church.*

It seems that by way of this clarification Synod still wants to prevent rampant development and chaos. But the sting is in the tail of “contemporary lifestyles” (whatever that may be), “local contexts” and “the character of the local church.” It places the responsibility for the contents of the liturgy into the hands of the local Church Council, and strips Article 65 of its significance. For under the umbrella of local context and character and contemporary lifestyle many things become possible. This kind of reasoning is already now being used to defend non-compliance with the rules of the Church Order.

Songs

Synod said also something about Article 67 of the Church Order. When a Church Council wants to make use of songs that are ‘not in the book’ (songs ‘in the book’ have Synod approval) or ‘on the list’ (songs ‘on the list’ have been released for use) the Council is obliged to provide a good reason. And this use must also remain an exception.

It is already a queer business that there are two classes of songs: those that are approved for use in the worship service; and those, though not approved, may still be used!

But with this ruling Synod decides that quite different songs may also be sung.

The Church Council must give a reason! It is an exception! But it is allowed!

A red thread

Our conclusion must be a depressing one. This course marked out by Synod is doing harm to the unity of the churches; the Church Councils are free to decide their own liturgy in the worship services (if you like, you may even read: free to decide the number of services), and each Church Council may chose its own songs.

This is clear foreboding of what the future holds for the Gereformeerde kerken: growing diversity, with everyone doing his (Church Council’s) own thing; growing estrangement; fewer

opportunities to talk to each other and support each other; growing independentism (each Church Council decides for himself).

The new direction is therefore a big step in the break-up of our church federation, and instructive for the widespread decline in our Gereformeerde Kerken. Here is very clearly visible what can also be seen in many other Synod decisions: the decision making process is increasingly left to the Church Councils; we require less and less consensus; and the churches show less and less (spiritual) concern for each other.

It is a theme that runs through Synod's decision-making as a red thread.

IV. FOR HOW LONG?

Obedient in truth and unity

Our Gereformeerde Kerken are in a deep crisis. How must we deal with it? What is our God-given duty? Are we allowed to continue voicing disapproval in a church which is corrupting itself more and more? Must we break with the bond of churches? Must we conclude that the Lord is busy removing the lampstand?

To answer that question three considerations are of importance – considerations that hold for the church of all ages:

1. Believers must in all situations be *obedient* to the Lord Christ. They must always simply and faithfully go the way He shows. And we can find that way in the Word of the Lord. This is always the first requirement.
2. To go faithfully in the way the Lord Christ shows, means that the *truth* of the Word comes first. That truth may not be attacked. No human reasoning may be accepted that takes away anything from that truth.
3. There is always the Christ-given obligation to seek and maintain *unity* with all believers in order to effectuate the love which we may and must possess in the Spirit of Christ. But that unity may never be kept, and that brotherly love may never be shown, at the cost of the truth. That absurdity is not allowed, and may also never be practised that way. Violation of the truth of God's Word destroys unity. In that situation, reformation is commanded.

Reformation *can* mean that there is the miracle of repentance – a widespread return within the bond of churches. God's Spirit can grant this on our prayers. But if, in spite of many warnings it fails to happen, indicating hardening in sin, then - in that situation and not sooner - reformation must mean: breaking the bond with those who are not faithful to the truth.

Unity in the truth, the unity with all true believers, the unity with the Church of all ages and places, can be restored only by reformation – reformation through return to obedience, *or* reformation through separation.

IV. 1 WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH?

The previous chapters showed, by way of pointing out the widespread decline in the churches, and by referring to actual Synod decisions, that our Gereformeerde Kerken are no longer faithful to the Word of the Lord.

We will now examine what the Word of the Lord requires from us in this situation. For that must decide our thinking and doing. Let's see.

Covenant violation and repentance

- *“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”* (Exodus 32:1)

The people of Israel – led out of Egypt by the Lord only a short while ago, participant in that powerful renewal of the covenant only days ago, witness to many of God's miracles, acquainted with the Lord's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – those people break the covenant. The first and second commandment are grossly violated. The Israelites no longer look in the first place to God and His promises, but to a man who leads them: *“We do not see him and don't know what has happened to him.”* This is essentially the sin of not being satisfied with the Word of God, but wanting *to see*. And yet the Lord told His people clearly that they must believe Him upon His Word, without *seeing*.

God's children violate the covenant because they refuse to take His Word to heart. The Lord becomes very angry about such disloyalty.

- *"I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."* (Exodus 32:9,10)
- *"When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments."* (Exodus 33:4)

The people's disloyalty can and may not continue to exist. God's punishes them. He turns away from His people; and also after His judgment has struck them, after the golden calf has been destroyed and many thousands were killed, God refuses to accompany them any longer. The Lord shows grace, and He accepts His people again, only when there is real remorse and genuine repentance. Not until then does He forgive the guilt, and restore to broken Covenant.

Obedience of faith

- *"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."* (Joshua 24:14,15)
- *"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* (Micha 6:8)
- *"Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching."* (Proverbs 4;1,2)
- *"See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it."* (Deut 12:32)
- *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Matt 5:17-20)
- *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."* (1 Tim 4:16)

Joshua's words are not incidental, but form the closing part of a long history of God's loyalty and faithfulness and the repeated disloyalty of the Israelites. During that time the Lord made clear to them, time and again, what He requires from His people: faithfulness to Him, serving Him uprightly and being known as His people. All He asks is that they are faithful to His Word and accept it for what it says; not argue about the application of His commandments; not 'adjust' all kinds of issues from Scripture to 'a different age'; and not exchange their first love for compromising theories which aim to 'sweeten' the Word of Christ.

These things really do matter. In the end the choice is between (1) complete loyalty to the Lord and His Word; and (2) turn away from Him by attaching greater importance to human ideas than to God's Word; which has the unavoidable consequence of invoking the curse of the covenant. Translated in terms of the present crisis in our Gereformeerde Kerken: (1) we either accept the Word of God for what it says, and desire to live accordingly, or (2) we welcome the spirit of the

age – the spirit of decline and disloyalty – and invoke God's anger and forfeit the right to be called the congregation of the Lord.

Covenant disobedience and hardening of the heart

- *“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”* (Revelation 2:4,5)
- *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”* (Revelation 22:18,19)

And if the church of Christ does persist in the wrong choice? If it does start bargaining with the truth, and downgrades the seriousness and holiness of God's Word? If it continues to tolerate that deviation in the life of the congregation? If there is no fear for the judgment, and no concern that the lampstand will be removed? If there is no prospect of an honest and widespread return to reverent obedience of faith - meaning that there is hardening of the heart? Or if only half-hearted efforts are being made to ease the conscience of those who protest against the violation of the covenant? If the compromise is always preferred to the radical choice?

- *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths”* (2 Timothy 4:3,4).

When this prophecy has become reality, what is the way for faithful believers to go?

Liberation

- *“Then I heard another voice from heaven say: ‘Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.’”* (Revelation 18:4)
- *“Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.”* (2 John:9)
- *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.”* (2 John :10,11)

Come out of her, my people! When the Church becomes unfaithful and, contrary to warning prophecy, takes away from God's Word, yes, tolerates false doctrine and flirts with the spirit of the age, the word of Revelation 18:4 comes into operation. When there is false doctrine and, in spite of urgent calls to repent, there is persistence in promoting it, Scripture commands to 'come out of her.' For the sake of the Lord!

Big words? Are we allowed to talk like that if there is 'only' (?) messing around with the Table of the Lord, if there is invalidation of the fourth and seventh commandments (throwing doubt on all the commandments, and indeed on the authority of God's Word), and if un-spiritual songs are being introduced in the church?

Big words? Too big? Too weighty at this moment?

Anyone who does not bring the gospel faithfully and radically and completely, but teaches something else, breaks the communion with Christ. Whenever the Church takes that direction, and thereby breaks the communion, the Bible commands: Do not welcome him who brings that message, and come out from the community which has broken the covenant.

That is reformation, *that* is restoration of the communion with the Lord.

But, once again: big words. Serious words. We must be very careful using words of that kind. Are we allowed to simply apply that judgment to our situation?

Humiliation

- *“Then I said: ‘O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.’”* (Nehemiah 1:5-7)
- *“I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: ‘O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.’”* (Daniel 1:4-6)

Israel had sinned, sinned grievously. The people had broken the covenant, and they had not listened to the prophets. They had not obeyed the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. That sin must be confessed. It must be brought before the Lord in sorrow and humiliation. That’s what the Lord requires from His people. First remorse and humiliation, then the prayer for forgiveness and the call to repentance. Everyone must do this, for everyone is guilty. The faithful believers Nehemiah and Daniel also know their guilt before the Lord. They belong to Israel, and share in Israel’s sin. *“We have sinned”*, and *“we have done wrong.”* They do not point to someone else, they do not put the blame on *“those people.”*

Looking at the situation in our Gereformeerde Kerken: we have broken the covenant, *all of us* need forgiveness for the sins of the churches and for our own sins.

- *“But Samuel replied: ‘Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.’”* (1 Samuel 15:22).
- *“To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* (Mark 12:33).

Genuine humiliation means genuine repentance. Words of humility that are not accompanied by a genuine return to the Word are worthless.

A call to repent

- *“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!”* (Isaiah 1:16,17a).
- *“Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.”* (Isaiah 31:6)
- *“and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”* (Jeremiah 18:8).
- *“Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to Him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.’”* (Hosea 14:2).
- *“‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’”* (Joel 2:12).
- *“The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Return to me,” declares the LORD Almighty, “and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.’”* (Zechariah 1:2,3).

- *“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* (Revelation 2:15,16)

When the Lord asks His people to break with sin in order that He *can* renew His communion with them, He has that message pressed on them continuously, in a loving and compelling manner. Both under the old and the new covenant there has been that urgent prophetic call: Repent! Before the conclusion is drawn that the Lord wants His people to break the brother-relationship, there needs to be warning prophecy - clear and extensive prophecy, brought with much patience and love, and supported by constant prayer.

During the past years there *has been* ongoing and intensive prophecy in magazines like REFORMANDA and AANVULLING, as well as in the numerous appeals to the ecclesiastical assemblies. Many turned a deaf ear to that prophecy, indifferent, irritated, waving it aside, offering excuses, attacking it. Israel’s prophets also had that experience. Their preaching was often not appreciated, and they themselves suffered personal abuse. But they persevered in their warnings, loud and clear, with patience and love, with great strength.

That call to repent is still heard today, also in the Gereformeerde Kerken. The prayers continue to pile up before the throne of God. But not for ever.

Following the Lamb

- *“These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.”* (Revelation 14:4)

What is now the conclusion of this Bible study? This: that everything hinges on complete and radical faithfulness to God’s Word. Nothing may be taken away from it – and that includes the Lord’s Commandments. But if that happens, if a different doctrine is taught in the church, a decision must be made: for or against faithfulness to Scripture. That situation demands penetrating, extensive and loving prophecy, calling for sincere humiliation and sincere repentance. If, however, not a single sign of sincere repentance is forthcoming (and only then), the other way of returning to God’s Word must be followed, by *“coming out of her”*. But first there must be prophecy, to the maximum extent.

‘Coming out of her’ is not an easy way. It will be accompanied by difficulties, sadness and hesitation; perhaps by loneliness and isolation, possibly by mockery and hatred.

But, looking to the Word of Christ we believe that

- *“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”* (Revelation 3:5)
- *“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”*
- *“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”*
- *“But David found strength in the LORD his God.”*

IV. 2 WHAT DO THE CONFESSIONS SAY?

We will also have a look at what the Confessions tell us. We believe and confess that the Confessions – the Three Forms of Unity – are a summary of Scripture. They are therefore a reliable guide in the crisis.

It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture. (Belgic Confession, Article 7)
We therefore reject with all our heart whatever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us. (Belgic Confession, Article 7)

We believe, in accordance with God's Word, that nothing may be taught contrary to God's Word. In earlier sections of this brochure we saw that there are in fact teachings in the Gereformeerde Kerken that conflict with God's Word. This is happening despite proof having been given, and appropriate warnings.

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though ... (Belgic Confession, Article 28)

Believers have a solemn duty in respect to the Church. They must separate themselves from those who do not belong to the Church, in order to join the true Church of the Lord. Those who are and remain unfaithful, in the preaching, in the administration of the Sacraments and in the exercise of church discipline – do they belong to the Church?

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church. (Belgic Confession, Article 29)

The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true Church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

The marks of the true church are obvious. We have seen that our Gereformeerde Kerken, officially in their major ecclesiastical assembly, no longer display the marks of the true church. To the contrary, the marks of the false church have become visible.

Therefore we have to say:

... we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God (Belgic Confession, Article 32).

V. CONCLUSION

The General Synod of Zuidhorn-2002 has taken *final* decisions in most of the issues that are discussed in chapter II. This applies to all the rejected requests for revision of decisions taken by General Synod of Leusden.

The following decisions are involved: on the fourth Commandment/ Sunday rest, dialogue with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, the blessing church-member (devaluation of the office), the celebration of Holy Supper in crisis areas, the introduction of unscriptural songs from the Liedboek, the application of Articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order, the Marriage Form, and the new Holy Supper Forms.

The conclusion must be that it is no longer possible, within the bond of the churches, to make use of the freedom granted by Article 31 of the Church Order, to regard the mentioned decisions as not “settled and binding.”

This is in accordance with the rule in our Gereformeerde Kerken. These decisions are final.

There is no longer the possibility of asking the next General Synod to revise these decisions.

The ecclesiastical rules, and the synodical decisions in respect of the application of those rules, make that clear.

Article 33 of the Church Order

This Article stipulates that, matters that have been finished must not be proposed again. Ecclesiastical practice allows an exception only if the appellant brings up new grounds. It means that the objections we have against these Synod decisions may not be raised again in the churches. The possibility of regarding the decisions as not settled and binding no longer exists.

General Synod also decided that only specific decisions, as listed by Synod, need to be ratified and executed by the Church Councils. Several controversial issues do not get a mention on that list. According to Synod, these are matters that do not concern the local churches, and therefore need not be ratified and executed by them.

It so happens that this involves issues which have caused widespread unrest in the churches, generated public discussion, and are close to the heart of many church-members.

Are the decisions about the Sunday and Sunday rest, and the celebration of Holy Supper by our army ministers not issues for which all the churches have responsibility?

But the road to further appeal has now been definitely cut off.

Unacceptable

Again, now that Synod has rejected all the objections in these matters we must conclude that the deviation from God’s Word is *permanent*. That deviation is not incidental. Chapters II and III show that it involves the full breadth of church life. Synod’s decisions are the tangible consequences of that deviation. It should be remembered that this brochure mentions only the most critical issues. The deviation is to some degree also visible in a number of other decisions and reports of Zuidhorn.

A distinction can be made between the relative importance of decisions and reports. Not every decision that turns away from Scripture and the Confessions needs to lead to the conclusion that acceptance means direct sin against the Lord. On occasion it is clear that a decision conflicts with Scripture and the Confessions, or it may not be conducive to good harmony in church life; but for the members of the church it is still possible, under protest and prophecy, to remain faithful to the Lord. When we consider, one by one, the different decisions and the report on divorce, this possibility arises in several instances. Taken on its merits, a decision or report may have to be rejected and condemned, but it need not (yet) be the breakpoint.

If, however, we take all the decisions together, and if we have an eye for the deviation from God’s Word and for the prioritising of human preferences in all the decisions, it becomes a

different matter. The decisions and reports are *not unrelated*. Taken together they display an exceptionally serious state of affairs. And for that reason our judgment must remain that these decisions of Synod Zuidhorn are unacceptable.

Straight contrary to God's Word.

Of *some* decisions we must, however, **judge unambiguously** - even if we would consider them individually - that they have canonised human wisdom to bind the consciences above the truth of God's Word. Acceptance of these decisions brings us into direct conflict with the obedience to Scripture. This is intolerable. It is our duty to remain obedient to God. That duty does not harmonise with the acceptance of decisions that are *directly in conflict with God's Word*. This regards in any case the decisions about the fourth Commandment/ Sunday rest (which involves violation of all the Commandments), the celebration of Holy Supper in crisis areas (desecration of the Christ-ordained Sacrament), the introduction of the ordinarium (the Sacrament is more important than the Word), and the blessing church-member (denial of the special office). These decisions attack the doctrine of the church. This is most obvious in the decision about Sunday rest, and to a lesser degree in the other three. The scriptural doctrine has officially been changed by the decisions of Synod. False doctrine has been legitimised as being doctrine of the church. Once again we must judge: *unacceptable*.

The bond of churches

With respect to the bond of churches, we must conclude that also our communal life is under great pressure. In fact, the Gereformeerde Kerken are in a state of disintegration. Although in the past they strove for unanimity and common accord in serving the Lord, nowadays much is left to the discretion of the Church Councils. It seems that we are no longer able to agree among ourselves. Moreover, it has been decided that commonly agreed practices (referring to Articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order) must no longer be regarded as agreements and rules, but more as examples and guidelines to which we should not hold each other too much, or which have so many escape routes that they will no longer function as rule for communal church life. The conclusion is inescapable that *independentism*¹⁰ *has secured a permanent position in the ecclesiastical developments*.

No repentance

The developments, both within the churches and in the believers' personal life, point to decline, yes, even to deformation of the church.

Here we will quote some words of prof dr K Schilder, from his speech *Kerk-verbond en kerkverband* delivered on 26 August 1944.¹¹

"The question keeps tormenting us, and demands an answer, how it is possible that so often that glorious house of the church is defiled by shameful things, to become a laughingstock for the world. That frightening question: 'how in God's name is it possible?' can only be answered by simply stating the abc of the Christian truth: If they break My commandments, how in the world can there be the expectation of a new day? The only cause of decline in the church is disobedience to God's commandments. Beginning in a small way, it is barely discernible. But kept up in its consequences, it drags the church along into the abyss before she knows. The one and only means to be rescued from that evil is: Recognise that weakness, and fight against it, in the company of those who unite in the plain act of obedience, that is acceptable to God and reachable for men." (quoted by Drs.D. Deddens in *Uit de diepten*, Woord en Wereld, 1994; pp65,66).

¹⁰ too much emphasis on local independence and too little attention for doing things together as bond of churches

¹¹ Kerk = church; verbond = covenant; verband = union, bond, confederation

How very appropriate are these words to the present situation within the Gereformeerde Kerken. Following a period of God's great favour after the Liberation in 1944, there is also now a decline. The half-heartedness in the churches of the nineties has resulted in a deformed church. We had to conclude that this is true for not merely one, or just a few, issues. We recognised it also in the worship service, in the preaching, in the communion of saints, in discipline, in the discussions and ideas about the church, in covenant life. There is decline and corruption on a widespread front.

For some time now the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to the congregation at Sardis have been applicable to our Gereformeerde Kerken:

"Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. ... He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:1-6).

This is why over the years many warnings and prophecies were given in the many, many objections against unsound ecclesiastical decisions submitted to the Church Councils and major assemblies, and in the requests for revision that were put on the tables of Synods.

During the past years a multitude of pleading articles was published in magazines like REFORMANDA and AANVULLING, not only regarding synod decisions, but also on a variety of developments in the churches. The brochure *Om trouw te zijn* was published only recently by LWVKO. Usually there was no reaction to this material. On occasion there was a reaction brushing aside the objections. There was only one admission of wrongs, concerning minor points. But there has not been any positive sign of repentance in the churches.

Would the Lord therefore not remove the lampstand, now that the first love after the reformation of 1944 is being forsaken and no sign of repentance is forthcoming?

Affirmation or reformation

At the end of this brochure we can only conclude with sorrow that the Gereformeerde Kerken have deviated far from Scripture and the Confessions, and in fact have abandoned the foundation of the apostles and the prophets;

- False doctrine is officially legitimised; the commandments of the Lord are stripped of their authority;
- The Sacraments are often desecrated;
- Church discipline is not, or insufficiently, applied;
- The communion of saints is broken up; the harmony in serving and praising God is disturbed;
- There is a strong spirit of decline in church life as a whole;
- Brothers and sisters who raise objections on Scriptural grounds are ignored or admonished; at times they are withheld from the celebration of Holy Supper;
- Independentism is gaining a dominant position at the expense of the bond of churches; the churches together show little and declining coherence;
- There is no longer the 'ordinary' possibility within the bond of churches to ask for revision of the majority of these disputed decisions;
- Over the years there have been prophetic warnings in REFORMANDA and AANVULLING, as well as in the many objections raised at the meetings of Church Councils, Classes, Provincial Synods and General Synods;
- There is no sign of a beginning of repentance; to the contrary, there are half-hearted efforts to keep the unity and peace; but the truth is passed over.

In summary, the Gereformeerde Kerken are showing more and more the marks of the false church. Our sad and difficult conclusion must be: this must not be allowed to continue. For it is the Lord Himself who warns His straying church that He will remove the lampstand in case of unwillingness to repent and hardening of the heart. There may then still be Gereformeerde Kerken (liberated), but the Lord Himself is no longer in their midst. For that reason reformation is commanded. And it is our God-given duty to devote ourselves to that reformation.

That is the choice we are facing: affirmation or reformation.

These are big words for insignificant people burdened with sin. We are unable to do it by ourselves. Let us seek the strength from the Lord.

VI. APPEAL

We will finish this brochure by pointing out how God's honour can be defended, and truth and unity preserved in obedience and brotherly love.

Let us call all the Church Councils to bring about a RETURN which includes every aspect of church life. So this appeal is not limited to a number of issues, but it requires a return from the sinful spirit which has pervaded everything in church life.

And although it has not affected everyone to the same degree (for there are also local differences), all the churches and all the church-members are individually responsible for the advancement of that spirit in all kinds of ecclesiastical decisions and all kinds of contexts, including the worship service and the preaching. **For that reason everyone must acknowledge his or her duty** to join in with this call to bring about a radical RETURN to the reverent obedience to God's Word.

This RETURN requires, after Article 31 of the Church Order, that the Church Council declares the disputed Synod decisions as not settled and binding, and thereby rejects them. It must also include the Council's willingness to call the Councils of the sister churches to do likewise. And further, that the Church Councils themselves lead the way in a submissive return to the Lord.

This requires collective humiliation before the Lord, and a general call to active and radical repentance from clearly identified sinful practices.

This appeal should also be announced, with a brief explanation, to the members of the congregation, in order that the disputed Synod decisions are removed from the churches and the churches led back into the right way of the covenant.

Reformation may no longer be delayed, and certainly not until a scheduled General Synod is held in three years time. Already now there are signs at the local level that the decline is creating intolerable situations for brothers and sisters. They have reached the end of the church-orderly road, and are running into a brick wall in their own church. It happens that they are completely rejected, because there is no longer the willingness to listen to their objections. The call to return is therefore a matter of urgency, not only for the sake of the brothers and sisters who are already leaving the church because they see no future, but especially for the sake of God's honour, and for the preservation of ourselves and our children.

In the given situation we may expect only a miracle from the Lord. And we will pray for that too. With the Lord everything is possible, and in that context our prayer is of great value. Let us therefore accompany this final **appeal** to our Church Councils by our intense and unceasing prayers.

We may remind our Church Council of God's own Word: *"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."* (Hebrews 3 and 4).

If the Church Councils would react positively in large numbers, healing and reformation within the bond of churches is likely feasible. The church can in that way return to the firm foundation of the apostles and the prophets, and avoid becoming a 'post-reformed' church which has left all that behind. It is our duty to prophesy once more in powerful, clear, and loving terms. Again: the Lord is able to perform miracles where we no longer see any possibility.

Each church member must therefore write to his/ her own Church Council, and to the brothers and sisters in the congregation. Suitable letter models are available upon request from the secretary of REFORMANDA (see details in a later footnote).

This duty may be seen to serve the church-gathering work of our Lord Jesus Christ. It gives us the confidence that the Lord will bless our faithfulness in this matter. We have seen it in the history of the Church. The outcome of our appeal is possibly different from what we may have in

mind. But all the struggles, difficulties, sadness, pain and disappointment may be seen against the background of a bright future. Our hope and expectation will eventually not be put to shame. Let us go to work in that unwavering conviction.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”
(Revelation 22:20)