

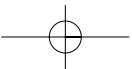
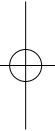
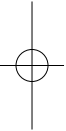
NOT BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN

Do the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands
not hold to Scripture and Confession?



The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated)
Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad

Zwolle, The Netherlands
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Introduction

The Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in the Netherlands (BBK) offers you this brochure.

The reason it has been made, is certainly a sad one! During the last years indeed a growing difference of insight has come into being within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands about how to deal with strongly varying opinions about important subjects in the churches. Discussion about the place and the meaning of the fourth commandment (Sunday and Sunday observance), about marriage, divorce and remarriage, the use of new hymns and other liturgical elements, can all be named as examples. There are other things which could be mentioned.

Successive general synods have considered these questions, often on the basis of well constructed reports from committees who had received tasks to that effect from a synod. Up until now, the greatly desired rest, clarity and unity in the churches has not yet been achieved.

On the contrary! At the start of 2003, a number of concerned members from a variety of congregations within the Reformed Churches, called for reformation, as a result of which actual schism took place.

Many within our circle of sister churches abroad feel very much involved in these events and the backgrounds to them. As sister churches we are at least called to support each other in the search for and the maintaining of a good Scriptural direction.

To serve this aim, good and honest information is necessary about what exactly has happened in the Reformed Churches, what differences it actually is about, as well as the question: what have successive synods actually stated?

The publication presented to you herewith, is intended to give the information

necessary for this. The BBK Committee hopes and expects that the contents may help our sister churches to form a good judgement about the points under discussion in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. If the concern of brothers and sisters abroad can be brought to right proportions, then much has been achieved.

A helpful element of this publication is that all important subjects are dealt with successively. In this, an attempt has been made to present well documented accounts of the various opinions in question and the historical account of the proceedings in various synod statements. A good overview is advanced in this way.

The reading and consideration of these things is highly recommended by the BBK Committee!

K. Wezeman, chairman

1. Do not go beyond what is written

In 2004, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated; GKv) celebrated that the Liberation took place sixty years ago. On August 11th 1944, the *Act of Liberation and Return* was publicly presented. Shortly after, on Sunday 20th August, Prof. K. Schilder, who had been deposed from office by the General Synod on the 3rd August, preached in Bergschenhoek, for the first time in a church which had liberated itself from the decisions of the synod (binding to new doctrinal statements, a.o. concerning covenant and baptism). He preached there about 1 Corinthians 4 : 6-7: "I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for you brethren, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying 'Do not go beyond what is written'. Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (NIV).

In this sermon Schilder said: "In my preaching, in my house visits, in my church discipline, I do not bind myself to statements from you [the synod], which have not been clearly taken from the Scriptures. I say: No, I do not bind myself to a statement, for which you do not have the courage to say: see, it is stated there and there in the written Word, and thus, it is true. I bind myself to the Forms of Unity, which originate from the Bible, and the rest I throw overboard".

That same Bergschenhoek was approximately sixty years later, the first place where a group of church members once again liberated themselves from synod decisions of which they disapproved. Throughout the whole country, about a thousand souls were to follow them, amongst whom one (retired) minister. In the meantime, eight or nine churches have been established. In five other places attempts are being made to establish new churches.

What happened here? Had a general synod again proclaimed certain opinions as binding? Were ministers suspended for turning down these statements, or candidates turned away from the pulpit?

Call for Reformation

The General Synod of Zuidhorn was closed on January 24th 2003. Not even three weeks later, on February 12th, an advertisement in the *Nederlands Dagblad (Netherlands Daily)* appeared containing a *Call for Reformation*, signed by Dr. P. van Gorp and 39 others. They pointed to eight areas of decline, distortion and degeneration in the Reformed Churches (liberated): keeping of the fourth commandment; sacredness of marriage; confession with regard to the church; inter church co-operation; hymns from the *Liedboek voor de kerken (Hymnbook for the churches)*; self-opinionated creativity in the liturgy; new ways of preaching; ongoing liberal criticism of the Bible.

The General Synod of Zuidhorn was blamed for going along with this and having legitimised these developments. As proof, the finger was pointed at twelve of this synod's decisions. We note here that nothing about the confession of the church, about new ways of preaching or about Scripture criticism was presented to this synod.

In the magazine *Reformanda* dated 26th February 2003, it was explained that this call was not meant to be a call for secession, but to repentance. The most issues mentioned had been discussed at Zuidhorn via a request for revision of decisions taken at the previous synod (Leusden 1999). Because Zuidhorn confirmed these decisions, the end of the church procedures had been reached. Church members were called upon to bring this *Call for Reformation* before their church councils. Should the church councils reject the challenged synod decisions on the grounds of article 31 of the Church Order, the churches could yet be saved. That this would mean a split with church councils who did support these decisions, was not mentioned. No single church council answered to this call. A few churches did decide to bring their objections before the next synod (2005).

A call to secession still followed in the summer, labelled as a 'new liberation': "across the whole breadth of the church there is a refusal to reject all that opposes the pure Word of God. For this reason we can do no other than conclude all the more, that the Reformed Churches can no longer be seen as true church. On the contrary - they have degenerated into a branch church, a pluralistic church, where truth and lies have equal rights and can be propagated together" (*Reformanda*, 16 July 2003). At a national meeting of

concerned people on 20th September 2003, Rev. P. van Gurp presented an *Act of Liberation and Return* (published in *Reformanda*, 24 Sept. 2003).

Those concerned indicated hereby, that as they saw it, the views as expressed in the synod decisions mentioned, cannot be tolerated within a reformed church. Conversely, church meetings within the Reformed Churches have never said this about the opinions of the concerned parties. Within the boundary of obedience to Scripture and Confession, differences of insight can exist. Should this be the case, the rule of article 31 Church Order is valid that the conclusion of a church meeting reached via a majority of votes, will be accepted as binding.

We do not want to suggest that the decisions of the General Synod of Zuidhorn are above criticism on all points. What we do hope to make clear is that there has been no suggestion of deviation from the Scriptures and Confession, and that for this reason, objections to these decisions can constitute no grounds to split the church.

2. Sunday

By way of appeal, the General Synod of Leusden (1999) had to judge a section of a sermon, in which was said that resting from work on a Sunday was not founded upon a command of God. The synod saw no reason to condemn this opinion. In support of this it was stated a.o. that in the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, there has always been difference of opinion on this point. From this it can be deduced that this statement in no way censures those who do want to speak of Sunday rest as a command of God.

A number of church members asked the General Synod of Zuidhorn (2002/03) for a revision of this decision. A synod committee researched the Scriptural information and the church history with regard to the Sabbath and the Sunday, and found that there was no one unequivocal conclusion to be taken on the basis of this. Therefore, the synod refused to revise the decision and called the churches not to oblige each other to rules which go beyond the accepted doctrine. The synod added, that with all difference of insight, agreement exists about the meaning of Sunday as a gift of the Lord, as the day upon which the church of Christ should come together and delight itself in God's great acts of creation and redemption. This was how the minister in question had spoken in his sermon about the Sunday: "Be thankful for the Sunday God gives you. A day which He protects from all busyness and haste. A day which we too must protect, so that the Lord has room to work in us through His Spirit."

Nevertheless, the Synod itself was not completely satisfied by this result: two not completely harmonious outlooks, while, above all, the legitimacy of one of both was contested in the churches. Therefore, she agreed to the suggestion of the Regional Synod of Holland-South, to set up a committee which should serve the churches with a document "in which a positive position with regard to the celebration of Sunday as the day of the Lord in the light of the fourth commandment would be offered" to help believers and churches in the 21st century act in an ethically sound way. To this end, amongst other things, these

deputies would have to conduct 'a theological-biblical consideration' of 'a Christian lifestyle in connection with celebration and rest'. It was a broad assignment; a critical reflection of earlier synod decisions with regard to this subject was absolutely not out of the question. On the contrary, according to the synod, it would be good if the churches not only registered differences of opinion but, attempted to rise above unsolved dilemmas.

This is also how the deputies have seen their task. The intended report appeared in the autumn of 2004 entitled *Zondag, HEERlijke dag* (Sunday, Glorious day of the Lord). But by then, the first secessions had already taken place. The report concluded about the statement of the Synod of Leusden, that within the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands there has always been room to think differently about the Scriptural foundation of Sunday as day of rest: "Our charcoal sketch of the Reformation history has given no reason to reject this standpoint. As far as the 'how' of the foundation of the Sunday as day of rest is concerned, there are, in any case, different ways of thinking evident, without these - up to and including the 20th century, ever leading to a breach in the unity of confession" (p. 77).

The *Call for Reformation* of February 12th 2003 said: "In this way the practice of Sunday rest through personal interpretation comes less and less under the control of God's fourth commandment to rest on the day of the Lord and to remember His great deeds. By doing so we turn away from His service and He does not receive what is His". Is this a correct sketch of the situation? In the report *Zondag, HEERlijke dag* deputies justly claim that the Synods of Leusden and Zuidhorn stood up for Sunday rest more convincingly than the General Synod of 1927, the last synod before the Liberation of 1944 dealing with this subject (p. 80). The report also reminds us that in another appeal case the Synod of Zuidhorn, in agreement with the Regional Synod of Holland-South, corrected a decision of the classis of Rotterdam. This classis had rejected the opinion that for the New Testament church a command not to work on Sunday, could directly be derived from the text of the fourth commandment. "This opinion has never been rejected in the Reformed Churches and the classis with her rejection had unjustly limited the existing room, regarding the case in question' (Acta GS Zuidhorn, 2002, art. 60).

"It is not true, that within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands the

fourth commandment has been pushed aside. I would not hesitate to call that slander. The churches have refused to restrict themselves to one interpretation of this commandment. That is different. It is not the commandment as much as the way we use it, which is the object of discussion and study”, wrote Dr. H.J.C.C.J. Wilschut (*Nader Bekeken*, Oct. 2003).

In the same magazine (Nov. 2004), Dr. A.N. Hendriks pointed out that Calvin thought differently about the fourth commandment than the Westminster Confession, which sees the Christian Sunday as a continuation of the Jewish Sabbath. Via the Puritans, this standpoint has also had influence upon the celebration of Sunday in the Netherlands. Hendriks writes: “For Calvin the Sabbath was abolished, as belonging to the types and shadows of the old covenant. Nevertheless, the command of the day of rest has lasting value: it is about *spiritual* rest, that we put away our evil works and direct ourselves to God and His kingdom. The deeper meaning of this commandment is that we have a certain day to hear God’s Word, to break bread and to call upon God’s name (...) We celebrate the Sunday, not because this is required in the fourth commandment, but simply because this is in harmony with the old Christian practice. And this practice is grounded on the fact that Sunday is the day of Christ’s resurrection”. Dr. Hendriks hears the echo of Calvin’s teaching in Lord’s Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism. He draws attention to the fact that the words ‘op de sabbat, dat is’ are a non-Calvinist addition to the Dutch text. The original German text does not mention the Sabbath, but speaks of ‘sonderlich am Feiertag’, that is ‘especially on the weekly free day’. A command to rest on the first day of the week, valid up until today, cannot be found in the catechism.

Prof. J. Kamphuis mentioned Luther in this connection. Luther and Calvin are not, according to NGB art. 7, the end of all argument. But, according to Prof. Kamphuis, “on 31st October, I like to remember these both reformers with a clear conscience and with gratitude, and without regretting their subsequent banishment from the church!” (*Nederlands Dagblad*, Sept. 19th 2003; English: *Lux Mundi* 22 [2003] no. 3+4, pp. 43-44). He who judges Calvin’s point of view, wants to tie things up more rigidly than the accepted doctrine of the Reformed Churches. He who sees the weekly day of rest above all as a gift, does no less justice to the redemptive-historical meaning of the fourth commandment than he who still sees the day of rest as a commandment.

Rev. J.W. van der Jagt made a comparison with the doctrinal statement about the assumed regeneration in 1942. Then the synod broke with a compromise made in 1905, when two opinions about the meaning of baptism existed. “Kuyper’s standpoint was declared to have binding force as the one and only biblical doctrine. No other doctrine could be taught. The peace was broken in this way.” There are also two views of the fourth commandment, but Zuidhorn made no one of these binding. But now the concerned parties want to see their opinion as the only legally accepted one. “They are the ones therefore, who break the peace in the churches now (...) At that time (in 1944) the churches were freed from a yoke. Today a new yoke is laid upon the people” (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 20th Sept, the day that Rev. P. van Gulp presented an *Act of Liberation and Return* to a national meeting; English: *Lux Mundi* 22 [2003] no. 3+4, pp. 44-45).

In conclusion, another two quotations from the report *Zondag, HEERlijke dag*: “In all church debate about Sunday, about differences in emphasis, in considerations and in forms of spending time, it is especially good to realise once again, that the value and the special character of the Sunday as rest day is adhered to by a great majority of church people: the Sunday is a day of rest, dedicated to the Lord” (p. 87). “Deputies are of the opinion that everyone who seriously considers what the synods have stated, will see how much agreement there is in our churches on the point of Sunday rest. This should lead to praise and thanksgiving rather than be a cause for church division” (p. 89).

3. The Marriage state

The subject of divorce has been on the agenda of synods continually since the General Synod at Ommen in 1993. The reason for this is that the evil of divorce also rears its head within the churches. Church councils struggle with questions regarding the application of discipline and co-operation with second marriages for those who have been divorced. On the one hand, Christian love requires that every case be judged individually; on the other hand, it is not good when church council policy differs in similar cases. For this reason, the original emphasis in the decision making, fell upon good agreements surrounding grounds for accepting divorce and policy for situations where discipline is necessary.

The committee appointed in 1993 published a report for the General Synod of Berkel & Rodenrijs (1996), on the basis of which a number of guidelines were formulated for the church councils (Acta, art. 47). So many suggestions for the alteration of these came to the next synod (Leusden, 1999) that it was decided to appoint a new study committee (Acta, art 72).

The report of this committee to the General Synod of Zuidhorn (2002) went in new directions as far as grounds for divorce were concerned, based on a fresh consideration of the Scriptures. Their conclusion is that the Scriptures give no grounds, but calls us to live in the style of the coming Kingdom. In this, it is not fitting that the "I do" becomes "I don't" through divorce. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul applies Jesus' teachings in a specific new situation. The church of today should do likewise "in situations in which following the general rule can lead to injustice".

The report was in agreement with one of the guidelines from Leusden (1999): serious forms of marital sin can be reason for resigning yourself to the divorce situation. Also were situations of unwillingness, powerlessness and inability expressly distinguished. In the first situation, discipline is appropriate; the other situations especially require teaching, directed at growth in the

knowledge of Christ. Great concern could be read in the whole of the report: as churches we are threatening to move away from following Christ more and more.

In the discussion of this report at the synod, appreciation was expressed, but also critical questions were raised about, amongst other things: (a) the relationship between the commandments and the style of the Kingdom, and between the Old and the New Testament; (b) the possible tension between biblical teaching and application in practice; (c) the use of 1 Corinthians 7; (d) the application of discipline. This is why the committee received a follow up commission for reflection, wherein the discussions at the synod and the reactions from the churches had to be dealt with.

In their report to the General Synod 2005, these deputies write, that the reactions from the churches are to do with the authority of God's word and the competence of the church. For this reason they give account of the basic principles of their work (slightly adapted):

- (a) We want nothing else but to maintain the authority of the Scriptures. They are our point of departure. We take the norms for discussing marriage and divorce from the Word of God. The canon is closed and we do not want to add anything to it. Nevertheless we must *deduce* things from the Scriptures. We do that on all sorts of points in ethics.
- (b) We do not want to present our exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7 as the only correct one, but indeed as a possible exegesis, which allows us the conclusion we have drawn. The opinion of the Synod of Leusden that there are also other serious forms of marital sin (alongside adultery and wilful desertion) because of which the church accepts divorce, is widely applied in our churches and is not dependant on agreement with the committee's exegesis.
- (c) In the report to Zuidhorn, we already wrote that we may not place ourselves on a level with Paul. But we can follow the course the Lord and His apostle Paul have set, and draw conclusions for a situation which appears today and which is not mentioned or indicated in the Bible.
- (d) Therefore, the conclusion that individual elders are permitted to relieve people of the rules, is erroneous; this is about the church as a whole, or, locally applied, the council of elders who take the decision there.
- (e) We must all take the warning in Galatians 1:8 to heart, but we do want to emphasise that this text is about heresy, about another gospel of salvation which was being preached. In our view it is important that we have to use just the whole teaching of the Lord.
- (f) There is development in Biblical teaching. Paul makes the teaching of Jesus wider and looks into situations which existed in certain churches. He applies

words of Jesus and expands the teaching. And Paul addresses himself to situations which did not appear in Jesus' time on earth, and thus were not mentioned, and not indicated.

- (g) We recognise that certain sayings in our first report such as "situations exist wherein Jesus' teaching must not be applied just like that" or "we can relieve someone of the rule given by Jesus" or "declare the rule derived from the teaching of Jesus, not applicable" can evoke much misunderstanding and just criticism. Therefore, they want to remove such sayings. With this way of saying things, we did not mean that we can forget what Jesus said in a specific situation - it might well sound like that. Deputies mean to say: if we are dealing with a new situation, not mentioned in the sermon on the mount, or which did not occur during Jesus' time on earth, this requires application of the rule Jesus gave.

The considerations in the report on divorce to the Synod in 2002, are also spoken of in the *Call for Reformation* of 12 February 2003. As a symptom of decline is brought forward: "*The holiness of marriage* is under great pressure. It is worrying that divorce happens more and more within the churches, but especially also that various church councils exercise no discipline any more with regards to the sin of a divorce which opposes God's Word. This is also true of remarriage after an illegal divorce. This takes place irrespective of Christ's express command".

The concerns expressed here, were the very reason why general synods took the trouble to involve themselves so deeply in this subject. In this, we leave the question of whether or not the judgement concerning the attitude of 'various church councils', is right; this observation has not been supported by facts. Should it be true, then the guidelines of 1996 and the ongoing reflection since 1999, should oppose this. It cannot be a legitimate reason for splitting the church then.

According to Rev. P. van Gulp in his speech at the national meeting where he presented an *Act of Liberation*, it is Scripture criticism gaining more and more ground which lay at the bottom of the 'direction of the church with regard to divorce and remarriage' (Reformanda, 24th Sept. 2003). Of this the *Act of Liberation* in question states: "With regard to the application of the seventh commandment, the last synod did point to maintaining God's commandment, but immediately took away the radicality of this by calling on the hardness of heart, the capacity of those married, the fairness with regard to the concrete

situation, the limitations of the seventh commandment in relation to the style of the kingdom of heaven and the feeling of the congregation'. The Act diagnoses here contravention of Matthew 19 : 9 and Lord's Day 41 and 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

What did the report say about hardness of heart? In paragraph 7.4.3 where deputies explain how they approach the problem of divorce, we read under point 3b: "In order to enter the kingdom, we must learn on the basis of Jesus' radical salvation in every area of our lives, to put sin away (...) Up until Jesus came, the emphasis lay on limiting and restricting sin and on the hardness of heart. Then things change in God's work: in following Christ, there may be no areas in our lives where we leave sin behind". Later, in a paragraph under the heading 'According to the measure of faith', the committee states "that the hardness of heart of which Jesus speaks as characteristic under the Old Covenant (...) has not completely disappeared under the New Covenant". On the basis of their explanation of 1 Corinthians 7:10f they conclude that it is not the intention that we refuse to take account of this hardness of the heart in future. If it is impossible to carry on in a marriage, Paul points to the way of separation and remaining single. "It seems that we need to differentiate between sins which come forth from weak faith and remaining hardness of heart, and sins which betray an attitude of disobedience towards God".

These citations also give an impression of how deputies deal with concepts such as capacity and fairness. The words 'limitations of the seventh commandment' do not appear in the report. He who easily turns to Matthew 19 : 9 as proof text for his criticism, must also give account of the comprehensive discussion of this passage of Scripture in paragraph 7.3.3 of the report. The report pleads absolutely for the standard practice that solemnisation of a second marriage after divorce will be refused.

We agree with Dr. Wilschut who wrote: "It is not true that in church practice surrounding divorce problems it is allowed to disregard the seventh commandment. Whatever urgent questions can be raised of the report presented to the Synod of Zuidhorn regarding divorce, the practice will probably be stricter than it often is now" (*Nader Bekeken*, Oct. 2003).

4. The liturgy and the Liedboek

Only since 1933, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands have an order of worship stipulated by a general synod (the Middelburg Order). In 1975, the General Synod at Kampen issued a second order as alternative. At that time the church order said nothing about orders of worship. When the church order was completely revised in 1978, a new sentence was added to article 65 (“The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord’s Day”): “The churches shall hold to the orders of worship approved by general synod”.

Afterwards, especially during the nineties, also as a result of a few decades of reflection on the principles of liturgy, here and there need for renewal in the form of the worship service began to grow. This raised the question, of how strictly this new regulation should be taken. This question was also put to the synods. The General Synod of Leusden (1999) therefore presented the committee for church polity and church order with the question: “Are further arrangements desirable with regard to articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order and if so, how?”. Article 67 stipulates, that in worship services the psalms will be sung in the rhymed version adopted by general synod, and also hymns approved by general synod.

This committee presented a report to the next synod (Zuidhorn, 2002) entitled *Koersbepaling (Determination of direction)*, on the basis of which the synod made these five statements:

Determination of direction with regard to the implementation of articles 65 and 67 of the Church Order

- (1) The churches limit themselves in the general synod to the plotting of *general frameworks* which, on the basis of the unity of faith must be *normative* for the shape and content of the worship services in all churches. The synod establishes these in the church order articles concerned and, if necessary, in general-synodical stipulations. Further, the general synod creates *facilities* for reflection on and for the practice of the worship service and of church music,

such as a collection and a list of songs, orders of service, liturgical forms, a liturgical supplement and other materials. The churches can make their own choices within these general frameworks. As far as decision making is concerned, the impression must be avoided that a synod in liturgical matters directs a local church 'from above'.

- (2) As far as article 65 Church Order is concerned, the synod is of the opinion that churches should not be bound by the church order to complete and detailed orders of service. The main rule must be that the church councils are responsible for giving the church services a sound content within the general framework. Cooperating in the general synod, the churches develop and accept various orders of service, of which the churches can make use as examples and as recommended orders.
- (3) The synod, according to article 67, approves hymns which answer to the criteria, which the general synod has specified and which are in keeping with the wishes and needs expressed by the churches. The effects on the peace in the churches are of importance in the decision making. Investing in lengthy discussions about the acceptability of a hymn shall have no priority in the churches. If hymns are disputed, both effects upon relationships and arguments with respect to content shall be reckoned with.
- (4) As far as the hymns are concerned, the synod continues to make a distinction between a collection and a list. The collection is the official publication of accepted hymns in the form of a book. The list includes hymns which may be sung in the churches, but which have not been included in this hymnbook. The list can be added to at every general synod. The synod will provide for a hymnbook and a list so extensive that a large choice can be made in all local churches and also for special services. Through this selection, the churches make a joint agreement to choose from it. When church councils do otherwise, this must be explained and should be exceptional.
- (5) When a church council uses the responsibility described above in such a way that damage is done to the character of the reformed church service, then there are normal church procedures for dealing with objections from church members and to care for each other as sister churches.

Summarised simply: a reformed worship service contains in any case, reading of Scripture, preaching, songs, prayers and collection of gifts, and the order in which these take place, has been helpfully indicated by the church federation but not strictly regulated. We shall keep to the songs that have been jointly approved of.

The *Call for Reformation* of 12th February 2003 states that the liturgy is undergoing drastic changes "because of the creative man's desire for personal experience" and, "dissoluteness in liturgical matters is being given the free

hand". The *Act of Liberation* of 20th September 2003 sees as a result "that everyone does as he sees fit", and therefore calls the situation of the Reformed Churches "much more serious than that of 1944". It would have been better if they had given these serious criticisms some foundation. As it now is, injustice is done to the serious way in which a series of synods and their committees have been busy with this subject. It is possible that the desire for personal experience plays a part in local discussions about the character of the worship service, but this has certainly not been the motive behind synod policy.

It is unmistakable that not every church member is equally enthusiastic about every liturgical change, but is this a reason to break unity? Dr. Wilschut wrote: "It is understandable that there is estrangement stirred up by liturgical changes which are sometimes too turbulent. But allowing free passage to false prophecy, is something different" (*Nader Bekeken*, Oct. 2003).

This false prophecy is, according to some, present in the *Liedboek voor de kerken* (*Hymnbook for the churches*), which in 1973 was put together for the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* and the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (synodical) amongst others. For this reason, they object that a selection of hymns from this collection has been released for use in the worship services. "If we decided 50 years ago that certain hymns were not Scriptural, you cannot suddenly start to sing them today", says someone (see *Vuur en vlam*, Vol. III, Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2004, p. 32). This impression exists indeed, but how accurate is it?

The General Synod at Zuidhorn has thoroughly investigated how the appearance of the *Liedboek* was received in the Reformed Churches (liberated). It appeared that no statement was ever made about this collection by an ecclesiastical assembly. Its negative image rests entirely upon articles written by the late Dr. K. Deddens in *De Reformatie* in 1973 and 1974. In these, on the basis of an analysis of a limited number of hymns, he came to a dismissive judgement of the *Liedboek*.

The continuity with his judgement lies in this, that also now, the general synods do not approve taking on the complete collection. What is new now, is that the editors gave permission to make a selection from the *Liedboek* (which they refused then). This selection has carefully been carried out by the

committee for church music. Besides, our own liturgical reflection has also led to another view of the function of congregational singing: it is not only a response to God, but also a proclamation to each other.

The General Synod of Zuidhorn seriously considered all the objections raised to the first 121 hymns (out of 491), and on the basis of this, removed four hymns from the collection. The report lying at the basis of this contains 68 pages in the *Acta*. With regard to the quality of the content of a hymn, difference of opinion can remain, but you cannot keep on saying that serious objections to certain hymns received no real answer with content or that only emotional arguments were given by the synod.

The *Call for Reformation* of 12 February 2003 sees “the heresy that the personal thoughts and emotions of the believer are central, and not God’s honour” as being behind the acceptance of hymns from the *Liedboek*. But, is there then in the Psalms no room for the thoughts and feelings of the believer? Other accusations say: “God’s Word not given enough room, and antithesis, covenant obligation, and covenant revenge are cut away”.

One example to illustrate the nature of the criticism: In the baptism hymn 335 the line “and no-one snatches it [the baby] from your power” (“en niemand rukt het uit uw macht”). According to the critics, this is evidence of covenant automatism. Could it not rather be an echo of John 10 : 28, where Jesus says of his sheep: “and no-one can snatch them out of my hand”?

In the brochure *Laten wij ons bekeren (Let us repent)*, in which some of those who signed the *Call for Reformation*, explain their objections further, the General Synod of Zuidhorn is blamed that she has openly ignored “the deliberate ambiguity which the poets from false ecumenical churches intended when they wrote or adapted poetry for hymns, and which has been demonstrated in requests for revision”. Prof. Dr. B. Kamphuis qualified this rightly in *De Reformatie* (29th March 2003) as “an unfounded accusation, which of course assumes that the objector is right. This is not the way to deal with each other in the church”.

1. K. Deddens, 'Bruidszang en zijn begeleiding', *De Reformatie* 48 (1972-73) 289-290; 297-298; 305-314; 321-330; 337-338; and 'Het nieuwe Liedboek', *De Reformatie* 49 (1973-1974) 105-106; 113-114; 121-122.

5. The accusation of liberal criticism of the Bible

Another bundle of objections have to do with the decisions of the general synods concerning the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK; Christian Reformed Churches) and the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* (NGK; Dutch Reformed Churches). Rules were drawn up by the General Synod of Berkel & Rodenrijs (1996) for local talks. If agreement was reached in doctrine at general synod level, as was the case with the CGK, then, opportunity was opened up for pulpit exchange at local level, joint worship services and communal celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Objections to this arrangement were presented to the General Synod at Zuidhorn (2002), based on three grounds: the CGK allow liberal criticism of the Bible, as is evident from the publications of Dr. B. Loonstra; they allow crossing of church boundaries (within the federation); and recognition of offices is only possible after a formal union. The synod rejected all three objections. "There are no indications that liberal criticism of the Bible is allowed in the CGK; with regard to the way they deal with publications which touch the authority of Scripture, the committee for Ecclesiastical Unity shall discuss this further with the CGK committee". With regard to the crossing of church boundaries, it was pointed out that the CGK are working on this problem, as was evident from what their last synod stated: "that with necessary prudence, an attempt should be made to change the attitude towards the crossing of church boundaries especially with regard to the appointing of church officers". Finally, it was commented that a union of two churches postulates mutual recognition of offices.

As to the continuation of talks with the CGK, the committee for Ecclesiastical Unity informs the synod 2005 that at his church council's request Dr Loonstra has given a further explanation of his feeling about the publications *De geloofwaardigheid van de Bijbel* (*The credibility of the Bible*) and *De Bijbel recht doen* (*Doing justice to the Bible*). Deputies report then: "the CGK synod concluded that the actual reason for concern has been taken away by the

further explanation. It must be said however, that the synod made no legal statements about Dr Loonstra, although implicitly they did so. Deputies declare their thankfulness that Dr Loonstra's publications have been dealt with in an ecclesiastical way. They are also thankful that the historical reality of the redemptive facts of the Ascension and Pentecost was recognised. The deputies conclude that this is no further subject for discussion for them. The way these things have been dealt with is, according to the judgement of the committee, not really different for both churches." The discussions concerning the way both churches view the statements of the Reformed Synod of 1926 regarding Dr. Geelkerken, will be continued.

The general synod of 2005 has yet to judge this report, but it is clear that both churches have taken this case seriously. Nevertheless this appears also to be a reason to note serious decay in the Reformed Churches (liberated). *The Call for Reformation* of 12th February 2003 says: "The contacts with the CGK are becoming ever closer, whilst in these churches critical views of the Scriptures in publications of ministers have been left as they are for more than 25 years. This is how liberal criticism of the Bible, long refuted and fought against (General Synod of Assen 1926), has found its way into the churches." *The Act of Liberation* of September 20th 2003, reasons in the same way: "Liberal criticism of the Bible is accepted via the decisions with regard to continuing unity with the CGK". These comments do no justice to what has actually happened.

Liberal criticism of the Bible has also been noted within the Reformed Churches (liberated) by the same camp, especially amongst teachers at the Theological University in Kampen. The deputy governors, whose task it is to guard the confessional reliability of the teaching, have received objections to a certain publication. These deputies have nonetheless, after thorough research, more than once stated, that there is no question of criticism of the Bible here. Up until now, this matter has not been raised at a general synod.

As far as the NGK is concerned (come into existence after a split with the GKv in 1967 about binding to the confession) there is yet no question of agreement in doctrine. In the talks between committees, attempt is being made to find agreement about the character of binding to the confession within a reformed church.

The decision of the General Synod of Leusden (1999), maintained by the General Synod of Zuidhorn (2002), to allow an army minister in areas of war or crisis to administer the Lord's Supper to a gathering of believers with certain well defined preconditions, is another stumbling block in the *Call for Reformation*. The objectors see here a step in the direction of an open table, and qualify this as desecration of the sacrament. But the Synod of Zuidhorn said "the rule for such an extremely unusual situation gives no reason to suppose that in our church federation there is room for an open table" (Acta, art. 101, decision 3). Rightly Rev. G Treurniet wrote in the *Gereformeerd Kerkblad* (March 8th 2003; English: *Lux Mundi* 22 [2003] no. 1+2, pp. 12-14): "Is a measure of compassion for Christians who risk their lives for peace asking to much? And some valuation of the care which has been exercised to guard the holiness of the Lord's Table?"

6. Evaluation

Do the statements made by the most recent synods of the Reformed Churches (liberated) differ on some points from opinions which were usual within these churches? It cannot be denied. But this is not new in the history of the Reformed Churches. In a reaction to the *Call for Reformation*, Prof. Dr. B. Kamphuis reminded us of the thirties of the twentieth century, when Prof. Dr. K. Schilder in Kampen, opposed current opinions. 'Reformation' means that you dare to be critical of your own past. "Characteristic of the reform movement of that time was that they had no untouchables. Reformed doctrine and preaching was considered anew, in obedience to the Bible and in faithfulness to the Confession" (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 20th Febr. 2003).

Do the statements made by the most recent synods deviate from the Holy Scriptures and the Forms of Unity founded on these? The *Call for Reformation* of 12th February 2003 was aimed at "repentance from the decisions of synod which are conflicting with God's Word and the confession, by putting deviations away so that the churches remain pillar and foundation of the truth or become that once more" (*Reformanda*, 26th February 2003). But such conflict has been demonstrated by no-one. There is no decision or publication in which a synod, a committee or an officer has freed himself from the witness of Scripture or from the confession of the church. If somebody thinks that this is actually happening, he is obliged to prove this carefully. As far as any attempt has been made to do so, the respective synods have disproved this with arguments. And if there is no such conflict to be seen, article 31 of the Church Order is then valid, a central element in the Liberation of sixty years ago: "whatever may be agreed upon by the majority of votes, shall be accepted as settled and binding".

He who calls for people to leave the church, without the commitment to Scripture or confession being at issue, breaks the catholic unity of the church. According to Prof. J. Kamphuis, the secessions in 2003 do not come into the same category as the Liberation in 1944: In the Liberation of 1944 an obligatory commitment to doctrinal statements was rejected, which went

further than the Scriptures and our mutual confessions. “We did not refuse to live together with brothers who were in various respects ‘Kuyperian’ in their thinking”. K. Schilder “was a formidable critic of opinions and standpoints offered by A. Kuyper and his pupils (...) But one thing he never did. In these discussions he never showed his fellow churchmen the door. (...) He also had his faults, but making the church a club of people who all think the same, was not one of them.” Prof. Kamphuis calls “the use of the term ‘liberation’ misleading for a case which is the very opposite of that of ‘1944’. At that time it was against binding conscience above the Scripture, and also above the confession. Now they pursue a binding of conscience which has kinship with a far reaching puritanism, and which also binds the church to more than what Scripture and confession bind us to. In so doing they distance us from our reformed past and from the unity given by Christ’ (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 19th Sept. 2003; English: *Lux Mundi* 22 [2003] no. 3+4, pp. 43-44).

Drs. G.J. van Middelkoop, editor of *De Reformatie*, recognised that the Reformed Churches (liberated) have their weaknesses, but that does not mean that he is in agreement with the tenor and conclusions of the *Call for Reformation*. “In the form for the Lord’s Supper we say: ‘We are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have a perfect faith and we do not serve God with as much diligence as we are obliged to. Daily we have to fight against the weakness of our faith and the evil desires of our flesh. Yet, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are heartily sorry for these shortcomings, and desire to fight against our unbelief and to live according to all the commandments of God.’” If this is true, and we can address each other on this point, nobody can say that at rock bottom, we are being driven by a wrong spirit which leads us in disobedience to go our own way. I agree that our life with the Lord today is threatened and affected in all sorts of ways, and that we have reason for consideration and self correction, and have to take time to think and sharpen our mind. But all our contrariness and clouded minds do not take away that God has started a good work in us and will carry on with that, today as well. Seeing this in our own lives should keep us from a cold and distanced way of speaking about our brothers and sisters in the church, and also from an unreserved dramatisation in portrayals of and qualifications of the real way things are” (*De Reformatie*, 1st March 2003).

Prof. Dr. B. Kamphuis ranked the *Call for Reformation* with an undercurrent of radicalism which has always been present in the Reformed Churches: “This radical undercurrent has, in my view, done much harm to our churches. Of course they were often right, I would be the last to deny it. It is characteristic of radicalism: they live on their right. But their wrong is greater. They go on to draw unacceptable consequences. They disturb the peace to which Christ has called us. They are responsible for presenting a caricatured image of our churches to those outside” (*De Reformatie*, 29th March 2003).

In 2004, the Reformed Churches (liberated) did not only celebrate a 60 years of Liberation, but also the 150 years existence of their Theological University, and the birth, 150 years ago, of one of their greatest theologians, Herman Bavinck. On the occasion of this last commemoration, Prof. B. Kamphuis wrote, that one of the things for which we can remember Bavinck is: “Being reformed, holding on to the confession, does not mean conservatism but it helps you to face your own time and move forward (...) To stay only with that which is old, repeating what was once said, does not help us further” (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 23rd Oct. 2004; English: *Lux Mundi* 23 [2004] no. 3-4, pp. 52-53).

It is good to pay attention to this in current discussions. Kamphuis: “Of course you do not have to agree with everything that is asserted today, and of course there is more than enough reason to warn about unripe experiments, but the least you can expect is an understanding of the problems which are there and an attempt to look for solutions.”

Bavinck was deeply convinced of the catholic character of the reformed faith: “being Reformed is being Christian. Being a Reformed church is being a Christian church. If you shut yourself away, convinced of your own right, and you shut yourself away from others, you fail to recognise the catholicity of the church.” Prof. Kamphuis then refers to Bavinck’s speech *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk* (1888, 1968²; *The Catholicity of Christendom and Church*), in which he warned against glorifying your own circles: “that dividing the church is a sin, is recognised by hardly anyone. People leave one church as easily as they join another”. Prof. B. Kamphuis ends his article thus: “We would do well also to listen to Bavinck on this point and learn, what it means to stay reformed”.

It causes deep grief, it calls for humiliation before the Lord and shame before the world outside, that we, in the (liberated) Reformed Churches, did not manage to be and to stay reformed in such a way. We agree with what Dr. Wilschut wrote: "Our problems expose the churches to the derision of many outside. It gives reason to scorn about 'those Liberated people' who experience yet another church split, who do not know how to keep the peace. This scorn deeply touches the Lord of the church. Do we not confess that we are his house? Our quarrelling can put obstacles in the way of the good news, for which we must clear the way (...) *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy on us!"