

**Report on the Level of Doctrinal Commitment Necessary
for Membership in URCNA Congregations
2012**

The following Study Committee Report was received by Synod Nyack 2012 as Pastoral Advice. Pastoral Advice is defined in the *Synodical Regulations: Appendix D: Definitions and Authority of Synodical Actions*, which states:

Pastoral Advice is Synod's application of the Scriptures and the Confessions to particular circumstances in the life of the churches. Pastoral Advice expresses the collective wisdom of synod to guide the churches in their pastoral care.

Pastoral Advice should be received with respect. It would be unwise to disregard Pastoral Advice in preaching or writing. It may not however, serve as grounds in matters of discipline.

Pastoral Advice may be appealed as outlined in Church Order Articles 29 and 31 (Regulations for Synodical Procedure, 3.4 and Appendix B).

Introduction

At its sixth Synod in 2007, the United Reformed Churches in North America took up overture 8, which dealt with the issue of membership in our churches. The original overture stated, "The consistory of the Covenant Reformed Church in Kansas City, Missouri, overtures Classis Central US to overture Synod 2007 to appoint a committee to study the level of doctrinal commitment advisable for communicant membership in our churches" (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, p. 174). The advisory committee subsequently recommended that Synod accede to this overture (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, p. 16). Synod 2007 went on to appointed a six-member committee, made up of the following (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, p. 16):

Rev. Tom Morrison (chairman)—High Desert URC, Apple Valley, CA
Dr. Nelson Kloosterman (reporter)—Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, IN
Rev. Daniel Hyde—Oceanside URC, Carlsbad/Oceanside, CA
Rev. Rich Kuiken—Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church, Pompton Plains, NJ
Elder Wil Postma—Covenant Reformed Church, Kansas City, MO
Rev. Mitch Persaud, New Horizon URC, Scarborough, ON

Synod 2010 was presented with two reports, both signed by three members (*Acts of Synod London 2010*, pp. 691–725). After debate, Synod declared "that neither report...is satisfactory as presented in order to provide guidance to the churches" and therefore "recommit[ed] this matter to the study committee to perfect their report" (*Acts of Synod London 2010*, pp. 61, 62).

The committee wishes to make known several things to the churches by way of preface. First, over the course of our discussion and work, we discussed on many occasions the

state of the question in theory, but because of the URCNA's existing liturgical forms for profession of faith and adult baptism, the committee has always come back to what does exist in our current forms, not what may be preferable to each of us individually. While each of us may have his own personal perspective, opinion, and belief on this issue, we have limited ourselves to what we understand the forms to say: **those desiring communicant membership in our churches must be able to give assent to what is taught in the confessions of our church** (cf. Affirmation 4 below).

Second, our forms pose a problem because their language is not uniform in answering the question at hand:

- *Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1* asks, "Do you *heartily believe*?" and then goes on to speak of the object of that hearty belief being the doctrine contained 1) "in the Old and the New Testament," 2) "in the articles of the Christian faith," and 3) "taught in this Christian church."
- *Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 2* and *Baptism of Adults: Form Number 2*, asks, "Do you *believe*?" and then goes on to speak of the object of that belief being "that the Bible is the Word of God...and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation."
- *Baptism of Adults: Form Number 1* asks, "Do you *assent*," then goes on to speak of the object of that assent being "all the articles of the Christian religion, as they are taught here in this Christian church from the Word of God," and ends with a rejection of errors: "do you also reject all heresies and errors conflicting with this doctrine."

Third, we as a committee have not been mandated either to change or to suggest changes to our synodically-approved forms. Since our forms concern a matter "that pertain[s] to the churches...in common," any suggestions for changes must "originate with a Consistory and be considered by classis before being considered by synod" (*Church Order*, art. 25).

Therefore, to bring peace of conscience and unity of practice to our churches, the study committee presents the following affirmations as our answer to the question concerning "the level of doctrinal commitment advisable for communicant membership in our churches."

Affirmations & Explanation

Affirmation 1: We affirm that we are a federation of confessional churches.

Explanation

This basic, fundamental affirmation is the unified basis from which we minister and live as a people in covenant together. In the words of our *Church Order*:

We as a federation of churches declare complete subjection and obedience to the Word of God delivered to us in the inspired, infallible and inerrant book of Holy Scripture. We believe and are fully persuaded that the Reformed Creeds do fully agree with this Word of God and therefore do subscribe to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. (*Church Order*, Introduction)

Affirmation 2: We affirm that every minister, elder, and deacon in our churches subscribes the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort because (*quia*) they agree with the Word of God.

Explanation

Every office-bearer in our churches promises to preserve the confessional nature of the church when they affirm, in writing, the Form of Subscription:

We, the undersigned, Ministers of the Gospel, Elders and Deacons . . . do hereby, sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare by this our subscription that we heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-‘19, do fully agree with the Word of God. We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same by our public preaching, teaching, or writing. (“Form of Subscription”)

Affirmation 3: We affirm that it is the responsibility of the pastors and elders of the local church to evangelize the unsaved, catechize converts and covenant youth, and teach their congregations in the aforesaid doctrines from the Word of God.

Explanation

This confessional nature of our churches is not only preserved formally in the Form of Subscription, but is propagated practically in particular by our ministers and elders:

The duties belonging to the office of minister of the Word consist of continuing...in the ministry of the Word...catechizing the youth... (*Church Order*, art. 2)

The duties belonging to the office of elder consist of continuing in...ruling the church of Christ according to the principles taught in Scripture, in order that purity of doctrine and holiness of life may be practiced . . . They are to maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments, assist in catechizing the youth . . . actively promote the work of evangelism... (*Church Order*, art. 14)

At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, with special attention given to the Heidelberg Catechism by treating its Lord's Days in sequence. (*Church Order*, art. 40)

Baptized members who have been instructed in the faith... (*Church Order*, art. 43)

When adults who have not been baptized desire to receive baptism, they shall first be thoroughly instructed in the doctrines of the Christian religion... (“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 1”)

Affirmation 4: We affirm that those who desire communicant membership in our churches must assent to the confessions of our churches and evidence an educable spirit for

continued growth in understanding.

Explanation

All who desire communicant membership must answer in the affirmative the following:
Do you heartily believe the doctrine contained in the Old and the New Testament, and in the articles of the Christian faith, and taught in this Christian church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession?” (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1”)

Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God revealing Christ and his redemption, and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation? (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 2”/“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 2”)

Do you assent to all the articles of the Christian religion, as they are taught here in this Christian church from the Word of God, and are you determined to continue in the same doctrine to the end of your life; and do you also reject all heresies and errors conflicting with this doctrine, and promise that you will persevere in the fellowship of this Christian church, not only in the hearing of the divine Word, but also in the use of the holy supper? (“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 1”)

In deriving the above affirmation in light of the relevant forms, the following must also be made clear:

First, “assent to the confessions of our churches” is not the same thing as confessional subscription. Our forms and practice understand that there is a qualitative difference in the level of doctrinal understanding between the office-bearers, who literally *subscribe* their names to the Form of Subscription, and believers, who give a *verbal* assent to the doctrine of the church. For example, our Church Order recognizes that not every male confessing member in the local church is eligible for being nominated to the offices of elder and deacon, but nominees must “meet the biblical requirements” as well as “indicate their agreement with the Form of Subscription” (*Church Order*, art. 12).

Second, “assent to the confessions of our churches” does not mean full comprehension or even awareness of all the nuances of our doctrine nor the ability to defend our doctrine. If this were the case there would be no need for teaching, which is clearly commanded in the Scriptures. What this does mean is that an educable spirit by those who desire communicant membership includes the expectation to read, to understand to the best of their ability, and to have “unity of mind” (1 Peter 3:8) with our confessional documents.¹

¹ Before our current forms for profession of faith were adopted (Form 1 in 1932; Form 2 finalized in 1976), the denomination from where we originated used “the questions of Voetius.” Gijssbertus Voetius (1589–1676) related question one, which read:

Do you confess the doctrine of our church, **at least to the extent to which you have learned, heard and professed it**, to be the true and wholesome doctrine, conforming to the Holy Scriptures?

[*Declaratisne vos doctrinam Ecclesiae nostrae, quousque eam didicistis, audiulistis, & professi estis, habere pro vera & salutari doctrina, Sacris literis conformi*].

Politica Ecclesiastica, Partis I, Liber II, Tractatus II, Sectio IV, Cap. III [p. 756]). These questions are still used by the Free Reformed Churches in North America (FRCNA).

Affirmation 5: We affirm that those entering into communicant membership in our churches must also promise submission to the government of the church.

Explanation

Uniting with the church is more than just a verbal assent to doctrine, it is a reality to be lived out in covenantal fellowship with other believers, who are overseen and shepherded by ministers and elders (the “government” of the church):

Do you promise to submit to the government of the church and also, if you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline? (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1”)

Do you firmly resolve always to lead a Christian life, to forsake the world and its evil lusts, as is becoming to the members of Christ and of His Church, and to submit cheerfully to all Christian admonitions? (“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 1”)

Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere? (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 2”/“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 2”)

Affirmation 6: We affirm that the consistory is responsible to receive persons into communicant membership in a way that is consistent with the Church Order—being satisfactory to the consistory and edifying for the congregation.

Explanation

The consistory must not only keep in mind its satisfaction when interviewing and receiving communicant members, but it must also keep in mind the spiritual well-being of the congregation, before whom new members are welcomed:

Baptized members who have been instructed in the faith and who have come to the years of understanding shall be encouraged to make public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Those who wish to profess their faith shall be interviewed to the satisfaction of the Consistory concerning doctrine and life . . . (*Church Order*, art. 43)

Persons coming from denominations other than those with which we have ecclesiastical fellowship shall be admitted to communicant membership only after the Consistory has examined them concerning doctrine and life. The Consistory shall determine in each case whether public profession of faith shall be required . . . (*Church Order*, art. 44)

This is also in keeping with the spirit of *Church Order* article 46, which speaks of the consistory administering the Lord’s Supper “in such a manner as is most conducive to the edification of the congregation.”

Affirmation 7: We affirm that those desiring communicant membership in our churches must promise to act in accord with the requirements of the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the Church Order.

Explanation

A new member assents to the doctrine “taught in this Christian church” and promises to live in accordance with it “steadfastly” (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1”). New members also promise to live in submission “to the government of the church” and if they “become delinquent either in doctrine or in life” promise submission “to its admonition and discipline?” (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1”) Several other forms spell this out in more detail:

Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere? (“Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 2”/“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 2”)

Do you assent to all the articles of the Christian religion, as they are taught here in this Christian church from the Word of God, and are you determined to continue in the same doctrine to the end of your life; and do you also reject all heresies and errors conflicting with this doctrine, and promise that you will persevere in the fellowship of this Christian church, not only in the hearing of the divine Word, but also in the use of the holy supper? (“Baptism of Adults: Form Number 1”)

Affirmation 8: We affirm that while assent to the confessions of our churches is required for communicant membership, pastoral sensitivity and congregational patience must be exercised toward those who do not yet possess full understanding of parts of such teaching, but who do not disagree with our doctrine.

Explanation

This situation in which we find ourselves as churches, in which believers are so fragmented theologically, demands our commitment to patient pastoral care and diligent instruction of those who desire communicant membership as well as after they do become members. For example, in speaking of other believers, when the *Church Order* speaks of “persons coming from denominations other than those with which we have ecclesiastical fellowship,” it says that they “shall be admitted to communicant membership only after the Consistory has examined them concerning doctrine and life” (art. 44).

Between the time these believers come to one of our churches and their examination before the consistory, the *Church Order* wisely does not prescribe that whole host of pastoral ways and means to transition people into membership, such as hospitality, inquirer’s/new member’s classes, and personal discipleship; however, some of these ways and means are set forth as well as deduced in our current forms:

The ministry of the Word is called, together with the elders, to shepherd the people of God in the Christian life, giving guidance and counsel in all things needful . . . and keeping the church of God in good order and discipline. . . . They, together with the elders, watch over the house of God for the right and fruitful ordering of the faith and life and worship of the people of God (“Form for the Ordination [or: Installation] of Ministers of the Word”).

The work of the elders is that of ruling in the Name of the ascended King, and as servants of the great Shepherd, caring for His flock. It is therefore also the duty of the elders to maintain the purity of the Word and sacraments, to uphold the good order of the church (“Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons”).

To “*shepherd the people of God in the Christian life, giving guidance and counsel in all things needful*” means ministers of the Word and elders must consider the abilities of those who desire communicant membership to understand the Three Forms of Unity. These abilities include, but are not limited to, those coming from a non-English speaking background, those who may have intellectual or mental disabilities, and those who are aged.