

The conclusions of Utrecht (1905/1908): *An Obstacle to Reformed Unity?*

WHY ARE THE CONCLUSIONS OF UTRECHT (1905/1908) AN OBSTACLE TO REFORMED UNITY?

*A Memorandum respectfully submitted by the
Deputies of the Canadian Reformed Churches
for contact with the Christian Reformed Church*

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. The Synod of 1964 of the Christian Reformed Church declared "that the Christian Reformed Church is willing to discuss differences between us and other Reformed groups in an effort to clarify our common Reformed Confession and thus to remove whatever obstacles may exist" (Acts of Synod, Article 144, Recommendation C5).

The Conclusions of Utrecht (1905/1908) are in fact such an obstacle:

- (a) To De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland these Conclusions have never been acceptable.
 - (b) De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Vrijgemaakt) set them aside in 1946 and declared that:
"de Verklaring der Generale Synode van Utrecht 1905 betreffende het dusgenaamde "infra- en supra-lapsarisme", de dusgenaamde "onmiddellijke wedergeboorte", de dusgenaamde "eauwige rechtvaardigmaking" en de dusgenaamde "onderstelde wedergeboorte" veelszins onjuist en daarom reeds ale pacificatie-formule ondeugdelijk is" (Acts of Synod 1946, Article 113). [*English translation: "the Declaration of the General Synod of Utrecht 1905 regarding the so-called "infra and supralapsarianism," the so-called "immediate regeneration," the so-called "eternal justification" and the so-called "presumptive regeneration" are in many respects incorrect and therefore unsound as a pacification formula."*]
 - (c) The Canadian Reformed Churches never accepted these Conclusions.
 - (d) The Free (Old) Christian Reformed Church never accepted them.
2. The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church of 1962 did not accede to the request of De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland to set aside the Conclusions of Utrecht because "no grounds have been adduced to show that these Conclusions are in conflict with the Word

of God or our confessional standards" (Acts of Synod, art. 144). This decision must be read in the light of the report of the Committee ad hoc which stated that "The question arises whether a Church that wants to be true to the Word of God may properly set aside its agreement with a statement of biblical doctrine unless that statement can be shown to be contrary to or unsupported by the Word of God." (p. 142).

The deputies of the Canadian Reformed Churches consider it a duty to do what De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland apparently omitted to do in 1962, namely "to adduce grounds" that the Conclusions of Utrecht are "contrary to or unsupported by the Word of God". Deputies do so in order that the Christian Reformed Church may re-consider its decision "not to accede to the request to set aside these Conclusions" and indicate its willingness to remove this obstacle to unity.

3. It may be granted that these Conclusions as "Formula of Pacification" had their merits in the historical situation in the Netherlands around 1905; they were, however, never meant to be "creedal statements of Doctrine" (See Acts of Synod 1905, art. 124). The history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands as well as the history of the Christian Reformed Church have clearly shown the danger that a formula of pacification can easily become a binding statement of "divine truth" (1955, 1956) and thus disrupt the unity between those who are otherwise united on the basis of the Three Forms of Unity, as happened in the Netherlands in 1943 and in the following years.
4. Both the Christian Reformed Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches should do well to realize that in the event of a union, with retention of the Conclusions of Utrecht (1905/1908), the possibility remains that members of the united churches may at any time seriously object to (parts of) these Conclusions; objections which might imperil the newly established unity.
5. We thankfully acknowledge that the Synod of 1964 decided to enter into contact with the Canadian Reformed Churches on the ground of a common subscription to the Three Forms of Unity.
6. Finally, we urgently appeal to the Christian Reformed Church to set aside these Conclusions as a statement of doctrine, because in our opinion
 - they represent an obstacle to unity among the Reformed Churches;
 - they are dispensable;
 - they are, being a compromise, confused and confusing;
 - they are, in some respects in conflict with the Bible and the Creeds;
 - they are, for the greater part, theological statements for which there is no room in the Church's Creeds.

DECISIONS OF SYNOD [1905/1908]:

A. INFRA- OR SUPRALAPSARIANISM

In regard to the first point, infra- or supralapsarianism, Synod declares:

- *that our Confessional Standards admittedly follow the infralapsarian presentation in respect to the doctrine of election, but that it is evident both from the wording of Chapter I, Article 7, of the Canons of Dort, and from the deliberations of the Synod of Dort, that this is in no wise intended to exclude or condemn the supralapsarian presentation;*
- *that it is hence not permitted to present the supralapsarian view as the doctrine of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, but neither, to molest anyone who personally holds the supralapsarian view, inasmuch as the Synod of Dort has made no pronouncement upon this disputed point.*

Furthermore, Synod adds the warning that such profound doctrines, which are far beyond the understanding of the common people, should be discussed as little as possible in the pulpit, and that one should adhere in the preaching of the Word and in catechetical instruction to the presentation offered in our Confessional Standards.

1. "... that our Confessional Standards admittedly follow the infralapsarian presentation in respect to the doctrine of election..."

The underlying principles of this passage are the legitimacy of the distinction between "infra" and "supra" and the assumption that the Reformed Churches have decided in favour of infra-lapsarianism. We wonder whether this assumption is correct? Is this compatible with the following clause: "the Synod of Dort has made no pronouncement upon this disputed point."?

2. The passage: "... it is evident ... from the wording of Chapter I, Article 7, of the Canons of Dort ... that this in no wise intended to exclude or condemn the supralapsarian presentation" must be considered an official interpretation of a creedal statement (I,7). This statement, however, is not supported by any evidence. Furthermore, the interpretation given is ambiguous: if "supra" is not excluded, is it then included? And how is this in keeping with the assertion that our Confessional Standards follow the infralapsarian presentation of the doctrine of the Election?
3. According to this first conclusion of Utrecht the two "presentations" (of infra and supra) are the two poles between which the faith of God's people in His elective dealings moves to and fro; however, if this is true, is it then correct to admonish the churches that "such profound doctrines, which are far beyond the

understanding of the common people, should be discussed as little as possible in the pulpit"?

Our first question here is whether this holds for both "infra" and "supra", since Utrecht uses the plural: "such profound doctrines". Our second question is: Do these words refer to Canons I, 14: "... without vainly attempting to investigate the secret ways of the Most High"? The Canons (I, 14), however, are essentially different from the Conclusions of Utrecht in their representation; they do not make a distinction between "the common people", who are far below the level of understanding of "these profound doctrines", and erudite church members, whose understanding might be better and more profound. The Canons spoke to all God's people and did not make a distinction between the understanding of "common people" and of the higher "gnosis" of the more educated church members.

We are convinced that the Synod of Utrecht retained the distinction between "infra" and "supra" in spite of the admonition of Canons I, 14.

4. In this first Conclusion of Utrecht the Church resorted to a theological statement; in creating and elaborating on the distinction between "infra" and "supra" the Church came dangerously close to vain philosophy.

B. ETERNAL JUSTIFICATION

In regard to the second point, eternal justification, Synod declares:

- *that the term itself does not occur in our Confessional Standards but that it is not for this reason to be disapproved, any more than we would be justified in disapproving the term Covenant of Works and similar terms which have been adopted through theological usage;*
- *that it is incorrect to say that our Confessional Standards know only of a justification by and through faith, since both God's Word (Rom. 4:25) and our Confession (Article XX) speak explicitly of an objective justification sealed by the resurrection of Christ, which in point of time precedes the subjective justification;*
- *that, moreover, as far as the matter itself is concerned, all our churches sincerely believe and confess that Christ from eternity in the Counsel of Peace undertook to be the Surety of His people; taking their guilt upon Himself as also that afterward He by His suffering and death on Calvary actually paid the ransom for us, reconciling us to God while we were yet enemies, but that on the basis of God's Word and in harmony with our Confession it must be maintained with equal firmness that we personally become partakers of this benefit only by a sincere faith.*

Wherefore Synod earnestly warns against any view that would do violence either to Christ's eternal suretyship for His elect, or to the requirement of a sincere faith to be justified before God in the tribunal of conscience.

1. It may be admitted that one should not disapprove of the term "eternal justification" simply because it does not occur in our Confessional Standards (or in the Bible); however, the issue at stake was and is not the term proper, but the meaning of "eternal justification".
2. According to the second Conclusion "it is incorrect to say that our Confessional Standards know only of a justification by and through faith". The following is given as evidence:
 - (a) the (doubtful) distinction between "objective" and "subjective"; this distinction which is of scientific origin, is not appropriate for a credal statement;
 - (b) Romans 4:25 and Article XX of the Confession. This evidence, however, is unsatisfactory and insufficient.Article XX states that God "therefore manifested His justice against His Son, when He laid our iniquities upon Him ... and raising Him for our justification." This is not what Conclusion B calls "an objective justification sealed by the resurrection of Christ."
3. The interpretation of Romans 4:25 presented by Utrecht is questionable. It is perhaps one of a number of interpretations, but the Church should not bind itself and others to one distinct interpretation if there is a different and better interpretation that stays closer to the analogia fidei. Our "objective justification" did not precede Christ's resurrection, but His resurrection preceded our justification, and our justification is by faith!
4. Although more remarks could be made about this Conclusion and its manner of reasoning, may it suffice to place a question-mark behind the clause that "the requirement of a sincere faith" is there, and must be preached (only) in order "to be justified before God in the tribunal of conscience". This is an unwarranted limitation of the glorious truth of justification by faith alone.

C. IMMEDIATE REGENERATION

In regard to the third point, immediate regeneration, Synod declares:

- *that this term may be used in a good sense, insofar as our churches have, over against the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, always professed that regeneration is not effected through the Word or the Sacraments as such, but through the Almighty and regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit;*
- *that this regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit, however, should not be in such a way divorced from the preaching of the Word as if these two were separate from each other, For though the Confession teaches that we should have no doubt concerning the salvation of our children dying in infancy despite the fact that they have not heard the preaching of the Gospel, and though our Confessional Standards nowhere express themselves about the manner in which such regeneration takes place in these and other*

children, it is, on the other hand, no less certain that the Gospel is a power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, and that in the case of adults the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the Gospel.

Even though Synod does not dispute that God is able also apart from the preaching of the Word -- as, for instance, in the pagan world -- to regenerate those whom He will, yet Synod judges that on the basis of the Word of God we are not able to make any declaration in respect to the question whether this actually occurs, and that, therefore, we should adhere to the rule which the revealed Word offers us, and should leave the hidden things to the Lord our God.

1. We do not believe that "this term may be used in a good sense", not even in contradiction to the Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine. On the contrary, whereas the Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine is one-sided, the term "immediate regeneration" introduces the opposite one-sidedness.
2. Generally speaking the usage of the word "regeneration" in this and in the following Conclusion is entirely different from the usage of this word in the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 3 and 33), the Belgic Confession (Articles XXIV, XXXV) and Canons III/IV (cf. Decision Synod Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1946).
3. After the manner of a compromise (and 1905/1908 was a compromise) the Conclusions of Utrecht endeavour to set forth also the opposite by stating "that this regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit, however, should not be in such a way divorced from the preaching of the Word as if these two were separate from each other". If this is true -- and it certainly is -- it must follow that the term "immediate regeneration" can not "be used in a good sense", and for that reason a Church should refrain from making such a statement.
4. Within the context of this Conclusion there is not sufficient ground for the reference to Canons I, 17, notably the statement "concerning the salvation of our children, dying in infancy", because:
 - (a) the Canons in I, 17, do not make a statement about the (supposed) regeneration of these children, but about their election and salvation;
 - (b) 1905/1908 should have taken careful notice of the admonition -- its own admonition incidentally -- at the end of this Conclusion, that "we should adhere to the rule which the revealed Word offers us, and should leave the hidden things to the Lord our God" (cf. Deut. 29:29);
 - (c) when we make a statement about the regeneration of "children dying in infancy", we introduce a meaning of the word "regeneration" different from the usage of this word in the Three Forms of Unity (see C.2).
5. The clause "that in the case of adults the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit accompanies (stress ours) the preaching of the Gospel" deprives Article XXIV of its strength. This Article states: "We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy

Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man ...". In Article XXIV the Church does not confess that the Holy Spirit merely "accompanies" the preaching of the Gospel, but that "faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him." This is the truly reformed usage of the term "regeneration".

6. Our objection in general is to the compromise-like, approach of this Conclusion: "on the one hand - on the other hand." We fail to see how the Report submitted to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church of 1962 could call this a "statement of biblical doctrine".

D. PRESUMPTIVE REGENERATION

And finally, in regard to the fourth point, presumptive regeneration, Synod declares

- *that according to the Confession of our churches the seed of the covenant, by virtue of the promise of God, must be held to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until upon growing up they should manifest the contrary in their way of life or in doctrine;*
- *that it is, however, less correct to say that baptism is administered to the children of believers on the ground of their presumed regeneration, since the ground of baptism is found in the command and the promise of God;*
- *that furthermore, the judgment of charity with which the Church regards the seed of the covenant as regenerated, does not at all imply that each child is actually born again, seeing that God's Word teaches that they are not all Israel that are of Israel, and of Isaac it is said, "In him shall thy seed be called" (Rom. 9:6,7), so that it is imperative in the preaching constantly to urge earnest self-examination, since only he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*

Moreover, Synod in agreement with our Confession maintains that "the sacraments are not empty or meaningless signs, so as to deceive us, but visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means of which God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Article XXXIII), and that more particularly baptism is called "the washing of regeneration" and "the washing away of sins" because God would "assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are outwardly washed with water; wherefore our Church in the prayer after baptism "thanks and praises God that He has forgiven us and our children all our sins, through the blood of His beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through His Holy Spirit as members of His only begotten Son, and so adopted us to be His children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by Holy baptism"; so that our Confessional Standards clearly teach that the sacrament of baptism signifies and seals the washing away of our sins by the blood and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, that is, the justification and the renewal by the Holy Spirit as benefits which God has bestowed upon our seed.

Synod is of the opinion that the representation that every elect child is on that account already in fact regenerated even before baptism can be proved neither on Scriptural nor on confessional grounds, seeing that God fulfills His promise sovereignly in His own time, whether before, during or after baptism. It is hence imperative to be circumspect in one's utterances on this matter, so as not to desire to be wise beyond that which God has revealed.

1. No evidence can be adduced for the statement "... according to the Confession of our Churches ...". The Confession nowhere teaches this.

2. The word "and" between "regenerated" and "sanctified" equalizes these two words. However, it is against Scripture and Confession to identify "regeneration" and "sanctification". The identification of regeneration and sanctification places an obstacle in the way of the Reformed confessor to answer the question in the Form for Holy Baptism: "Do you acknowledge that our children ... are sanctified in Christ" with an honest "I do". The Form employs this expression within the Pauline concept of "being in Adam" -- "being in Christ"; this expression does not indicate individual "regeneration", but membership in the Covenant and Church of God (cf. the expression "the same promises" in Article XXXIV with regard to the seed of the Covenant of both the Old and the New Dispensations).
3. The words "by virtue of the promise of God" (i.e. to be held to be regenerated, past tense!) disclose that 1905/1908 conceived these promises of God as given to the elected children of the Covenant only, For, thus it is claimed, if "upon growing up these children should manifest the contrary ..." the promises of God had obviously never been theirs.
4. It is not merely "less correct" to claim that baptism "is administered on the ground of their presumed regeneration"; it is incorrect and without foundation.
5. It is questionable whether we may call it a "judgment of charity" when the church holds "the seed of the Covenant as regenerated". It is more charitable to hold them for what they are: conceived and born in sin, to urge them that they must be born again (Form of Baptism, and to remind them of the promises of the Triune God, Who will deliver them from this state of death when they trust in His Word. Moreover, the "judgment of charity" is, as a rule, used in conjunction with the adult Covenant members whom we have to judge, according to this "judgment of charity" by their words and walk.
6. In its reference to Romans 9:6,7, Utrecht again selected a specific (and, as to that, contestable) interpretation, as though the Apostle Paul had limited the validity of the promise; however, in the preceding verses Paul had stressed the unlimited validity of the Covenant promises! He only limited the realization of the promises to those who had received them in faith.
7. The very character of God's Covenant and His promises as firm and sure forbids us to adopt any presumption ("... to be held to be ...").
8. It is correct "... to urge earnest self-examination ..." if we only have determined to what end we should examine ourselves. Are we examining ourselves to discover whether we possess the marks of regeneration and election? Or is it to find out whether we believe God's promises and walk in His ways? We are convinced that the self-examination should be concerned with the second possibility. The insistence on self-examination within the context of presumptive regeneration is somewhat suspicious.
9. The same holds for the quotation from Confession Article XXXIII. History offers sufficient evidence that the words "visible signs and seals of an inward and

invisible thing" have often been interpreted as indicating a presumed "inward present grace" in the children of the Covenant at the time of their baptism: their baptism, then, is an outward proof of what is present within them. Scripture and Confession do not teach such a doctrine.

10. The reference to the prayer of thanksgiving in the Form of Baptism must be declined as evidence for the doctrine of "presumptive regeneration"! The Conclusions of Utrecht urge us to believe that we, in this prayer, express our gratitude to the Lord for the fact that regeneration has been realized in the baptized child; however, in this prayer, the Covenant congregation brings thanks to the Lord for what it "has in Christ". The word "has" means here "has in the promise". This prayer of thanksgiving is based on the doctrine of the covenant with promises and demands.
11. In the same paragraph Conclusion 4 makes mention of God's promises to us and our children. We really regret the absence of the words: "if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart" (Heid. Cat. Lord's Day 23). It is through faith alone that "the washing away of our sins by the blood and the Spirit of Jesus Christ" becomes a reality in our life.
12. At the end of the penultimate paragraph Utrecht claims: "the justification and the renewal by the Holy Spirit as benefits which God has bestowed (geschonken heeft) upon our seed". But in Baptism the LORD signifies and seals unto us and our seed that He will do this (as the Form reiterates) -- and once more: on the condition of faith!
13. In the final paragraph it is inconsistent to claim (after the assertion that we must(!) hold the seed of the Covenant for (already) regenerated (past tense)), "that this regeneration can take place before, during or after baptism". This striking addition (striking in the light of the confident language in the beginning of this Conclusion) makes it manifest that the statement that our seed must be held to be regenerated at the moment of their baptism, was definitely too positive.
14. Moreover, the addition ("before, during, after") makes it obvious that the tenet of this fourth Conclusion actually is the presumptive election of our seed (whether it is regenerated before, during or after their baptism is of secondary importance). Is that indeed the Reformed doctrine of the Covenant the Lord made with us and our seed (and not only with our elected seed)?
15. And all this remains valid "until ... upon growing up they should manifest the contrary". When will the contrary of regeneration or election become manifest? How does it become manifest? When is this manifestation final and unalterable (considering the thief at the cross, who was changed and saved moments before his death?) Who is to confirm this manifestation? How far removed are we here from the language of Scripture.

16. Considering the claims that this Conclusion deserves the reverence of "divine truth" and that "the exceptions (to the rule of being regenerated, elected) can be neglected", it will certainly be apparent that such a doctrine undermines the Covenantal responsibility and impairs the assurance of faith which are both founded on the certainty of the promises of God (and on them alone), and not on any presupposed election and/or regeneration.
17. This fourth Conclusion leans heavily on the third Conclusion (on "Immediate Regeneration"). We have already indicated that the third Conclusion is "a broken reed".
18. The Synod of Utrecht combined the third and the fourth Conclusion and thus made "immediate regeneration" the rule, among the Covenant congregation that is. This renders the third Conclusion in its essence contradictory.
19. The statement that "God fulfills His promises sovereignly in His Own time" ignores the fact that God fulfills His promises to those who believe and trust in Him, and receive His promises in faith. The appeal to God's sovereignty is therefore futile and, in fact, nothing but a diversion.
20. Part of this way of reasoning is the doctrine that the baptism of our children is only true, real and "full" when administered to a regenerated or elected child of the Covenant. This doctrine paves the way for the concept of two covenants: one external and one internal. The external covenant comprises all children of the Covenant; the internal covenant comprises the elected children of the Covenant only. This is not Reformed.

FINAL COMMENTS:

We do not think that we have been unnecessarily critical in analyzing the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905/1908. We are convinced that the matters herein discussed will continue to arise in the minds of truly Reformed confessors, and should therefore be inserted into the present discussions between the Christian Reformed Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches.

The Deputies of the Canadian Reformed Churches for
contact with the Christian Reformed Church.

Burlington, 14 December 1966.

*[Note: Deputies appointed by General Synod 1965
who wrote this Memorandum were Rev. F.
Kouwenhoven, Rev. M. VanBeveren, Rev. D.
VanderBoom, and Rev. G. VanDooren]*

Excerpt from Acts of General Synod 1968 of the Canadian Reformed Churches

SUPPLEMENT 10 (Art. 134) REPORT OF ADVISORY COMMITTEE III ON THE *Contact with the Christian Reformed Church*

Re: Report of Deputies ad IV, pp. 7-19, on The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905/1908

From the Supplement to the Report of Deputies (Ag. Report I, 3b) your committee learned that Synod 1968 of Christian Reformed Church declared "that the 'Conclusions of Utrecht', as adopted in 1908, no longer have the status of binding doctrinal deliverances within the Christian Reformed Church". The First of the three grounds for this decision was that the Christian Reformed Synod 1962 had declared that these Conclusions "shall not be used as a test for membership or holding office in the Christian Reformed Church, nor as a test for admitting ministers to the Christian Reformed ministry". The other grounds merely express the hope and expectation that the decision would "facilitate" the relations with the Canadian Reformed Churches and the "Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken".

Your committee observes that:

- a) Synod 1968 of the Christian Reformed Church drew a conclusion from the decision of its predecessor in 1962. From the Report of our Deputies we learn that for a time there had been an inconsistency between "to abide by" and "not to agitate against". This has now been taken away.
- b) The other two grounds are not really *grounds*, but rather *goals*. The Christian Reformed Church wanted to remove obstacles. This in itself is to be appreciated.

Your committee wants to express its appreciation for the work of Deputies who have not only convinced the Christian Reformed Church of this inconsistency (see their Report, pp. 9-15), but who have also made it abundantly clear in their *Memorandum on '1908'* that "The Conclusions of Utrecht (are) an obstacle to unity". The following remarks are to be added:

Here is a case of the status of *doctrinal* deliverances. In previous years it was said that they contain 'biblical truth' (" . . . whether a church that wants to be true to the Word of God may properly set aside its agreement with a statement of biblical doctrine unless that statement can be shown to be contrary to or unsupported by the Word of God." *Acts* Christian Reformed Synod 1962, Supplement 2, p. 142). Accordingly the Christian Reformed Synod 1962 did "not accede to the request to set aside the Conclusions of Utrecht". One of the grounds for this decisions was: "No grounds have been adduced to show that these conclusions are in conflict with the Word of God or our confessional standards. (Cf. Church Order, Art. 31)". *Acts 1962*, Art. 144. Your committee had therefore expected that the Christian Reformed Church, in annulling the binding character of these *Conclusions of Utrecht*, would now have adduced grounds from "the Word of God or our confessional standards" to prove that they were "contrary to or unsupported by the Word of God." The committee much regret the fact that no such grounds were given.

[Note: The members of Advisory Committee III of General Synod 1968 were Rev. H.A. Stel, Rev. G. VanDooren, S. Tuininga, and J. Vanderveen]