

History of the United Reformed Churches in North America

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The United Reformed Churches in North America (URC) began in 1996 when 36 independent Reformed churches covenanted together to form a federation under the 1914 *Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (CRC), a slight revision of the *Church Order of Dort*. This federation of churches was the outgrowth of a movement within the CRC that protested changes taking place in that once faithful denomination and which attempted to call it back to its confessional, Reformed roots. This movement received impetus from a series of consistorial conferences the first of which was held in October 1986 at the invitation of three CRC consistories. At that meeting representatives of twenty CRC's condemned that method of biblical interpretation which allows contemporary culture to determine the meaning of Scripture and they rejected several CRC synodical decisions that had compromised Scriptural authority. The Consistorial Conference met four times before it changed its name to the Christian Reformed Alliance in March 1990, which then became the Alliance of Reformed Churches (ARC) two years later. The later name change reflected the fact that many participating churches had already severed their ties with the CRC. Sixty-two churches were represented at the November 1994 meeting of the ARC. The existence of this movement, along with organizations of individual members like the Association of Christian Reformed Laymen and Concerned Members of the Christian Reformed Church, were testimony to growing ferment caused by winds of change which were blowing through the CRC.

In the early 1990's several congregations seceded from the CRC, remaining independent for a time, even as they sought fellowship with one another in the Alliance of Reformed Churches. At the 1995 meeting of the ARC, the majority of the independent churches committed to joining together in federative unity. In the interim they called themselves the Federation of Uniting Reformed Churches. At their first synod, Synod Lynwood 1996, the churches adopted the name United Reformed Churches in North America. In 1997, Synod St. Catharines adopted the *Church Order* we have today also based on the *Church Order Of Dort*. Ten years later, in spite of our sins and weaknesses the Lord has blessed the URC with ministers in almost every congregation, with several mission congregations and with growth in number. Our 2006 *Directory* indicates that we number 20,700 members in 96 congregations which are divided into 6 classes, 2 in Canada and 4 in the United States. Although several churches of the ARC chose to remain independent, yet we are grateful that they have continued to have close fellowship with the URC and some have subsequently federated with us.

Even though our history as a federation is quite brief, we have deep roots in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. More specifically, we trace our history to the Reformation in Geneva as it spread to the Netherlands and brought about the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. In 1562, the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands adopted the *Belgic Confession of Faith* as their confessional statement and soon thereafter required subscription to it by all officebearers before being installed. By 1566, the *Heidelberg Catechism* had been added to the *Confession of Faith* of the Reformed churches as a tool for preaching and teaching in the churches. When Jacob Arminius and his followers began to pose a serious threat to the confessions of the Reformed churches, the Lord in His providence allowed the churches to convene the ecumenical Synod of Dort which met from November 1618 until May 1619. The Synod of Dort upheld the Reformed confessions and added the further explanation

of the *Canons of Dort*, together with the *Formula of Subscription* still required among our churches today.

While spiritual life flourished in the Dutch Reformed churches for many years, new challenges began to confront the people of God, especially Rationalism and Pietism. The churches' Reformed confessions were again being threatened by opponents of the truth and were falling into general disuse. Spiritual life was in decline, spawning the Second Reformation which included believers meeting in conventicles for nourishment and encouragement. During this time the freedom of the Reformed Churches came under direct attack when, in 1816, the *Church Order of Dort* was usurped by the *General Rule* imposed by King William I. Under this new rule officebearers were no longer required to subscribe to the three confessions of the church, referred to as the *Three Forms of Unity*. Congregations were forced to endure the ministries of men who had strayed far from the truth.

From this decline the Lord raised up two movements of reformation which continue to have a strong influence on our churches today. The first movement, the *Afscheiding*, occurred in 1834 when Rev. Hendrick De Cock and the consistory of the Reformed Church in Ulrum signed the *Act of Secession and Return*. This spawned a large exodus of members and congregations from the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands who wanted to return to the pure preaching of God's Word without government interference. Many of these believers immigrated to the United States where they eventually formed what was later called the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Prior to the 1880's most of the Dutch immigrants to the United States affiliated with the Dutch Reformed Church (now known as the Reformed Church in America, or RCA). But when the RCA made the decision in the 1880's to allow members of secret societies, such as the Masonic Order, to be members in good standing in their churches, the Dutch immigrants were instructed by their home consistories to join the fledgling CRC. This sparked the first real growth of the CRC which had been founded in 1857.

In 1886 another secession occurred in the Netherlands, the *Doleantie*, a movement of many congregations led by the influential Dr. Abraham Kuyper. At first these churches organized to reform the state controlled church, but when their calls to return to the Word of God fell on deaf ears they separated in 1888. In 1892 they united with many churches of the *Afscheiding* to form the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN)*). From these churches, many immigrated to the United States and Canada, swelling the membership of the Christian Reformed Church, especially during the 1940's and 1950's.

For many years the Christian Reformed Church remained faithful to the Lord and His Word. In time, however, there began to be evidences that all was not well. In 1952 the CRC synod was confronted with a seminary faculty deeply divided in theological perspective. For a number of years, some of the professors had become enamored of the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, as mediated by G. C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam (Neo-orthodoxy was a reaction to the modernism of the 19th century which rejected the Bible as the Word of God. Neo-orthodoxy responded by saying the Bible contains the Word of God, which was hailed by many as a return to orthodoxy. However, orthodoxy is defined by saying the Bible is the Word of God. By saying only "it contains the Word of God" the authority of every word was undermined and reader or scholar could still reject whatever he did not like, just as in the

liberalism of the previous century). This trend toward neo-orthodoxy at Calvin was resisted by some, including Dr. William Hendriksen who was then teaching at Calvin Seminary. The synod chose to deal with the divided faculty by firing every one, which was a great loss for the cause of truth and the Reformed faith. The action of the synod—a political solution—did not solve the problem, and, as the faculty was rebuilt, the majority of the new professors hired were sympathetic to neo-orthodoxy, or the progressive perspective. This has had a profound affect on all the CRC ministers trained in the last fifty years. Thankfully many resisted the harmful influences in their training and became stronger advocates of the truth because of it, but over the years the majority of ministers succumbed to it.

The division that had been present in the seminary prior to 1952 was propagated in the churches by two magazines that were begun in the 1950's: *The Reformed Journal*, representing the progressive movement, and the *Torch and Trumpet* (later called *The Outlook*) representing the historical Reformed faith. By the mid 1980's the official magazine of the CRC, *The Banner*, had taken up the progressive cause and *The Reformed Journal* was no longer needed.

The progressive movement was aided by a revision of the *Church Order* in 1965, which gave more authority to synodically appointed boards, placing the consistories further away from their seminary, the church publications and the church's mission efforts. Cut loose from the solid mooring of the Bible as the Word of God for all ages, the churches drifted into a general spiritual and theological malaise in which the preaching of God's Word lost its edge. In many places, the Word, as summarized by the *Catechism*, was no longer preached to the congregations nor was the *Catechism* memorized by and explained to the youth. When ministers lost faith in the gospel as the power of God unto salvation, worship began to be corrupted by liturgical innovations of various kinds as leaders searched for new methods to make the church grow. In the 1960's the Arminian "love of God" controversy surrounding Prof. Harold Dekker was not clearly answered by the synod, and in the 1970's Rev. Harry Boer's rejection of the doctrine of reprobation as confessed in the *Canons of Dort* did not result in his deposition from office. In 1972 the churches adopted a synodical report on the nature and extent of biblical authority which tended to reduce the inspiration and authority of Scripture to its main message of redemption. In 1973 the synod took a stand on homosexuality which stated that homosexual desire is no different than color blindness or a club foot and therefore not culpable as long as it is not openly expressed. During this time, many began to call for the ordination of women to ecclesiastical office. Much controversy arose over this issue and by the time the dust settled in the early 1990s, the synod had approved the ordination of women to all the offices of the church. Last, but by no means least, was the refusal of the synod to censure the ideas of Professor Howard Van Til concerning the evolutionary origin of the universe and his higher-critical approach to Scripture that declared some parts of the Bible to not be the Word of God.

The primary concern of those who left the CRC (over 20,000 souls in just a few years in the mid 1990's) was the adoption by many leaders in the CRC of a new method of interpreting the Bible that contradicted the Bible and our Reformed confessions. It was called "the new hermeneutic" that is, a new way of reading the Bible which consists of saying that the Bible is not clear in addressing contemporary problems, often leaving us in doubt about how we should proceed. The reason the Bible is not clear, it is said, is because the Bible's message to first century Christians (or earlier to Israel) was so conditioned by their culture and local circumstances that it is not directly applicable to our modern culture and different historical

situation. It was God's Word when it was written, but it is not God's will for us now, they say. This new method of interpreting the Bible contradicts what we confess about the Bible, especially in *Belgic Confession*, article 7. This new way of reading the Bible was used in official synodical decisions to defend the ordination of women, redefine homosexuality and permit evolutionary theory.

For many years, faithful men and congregations labored within the CRC to promote the historic Reformed faith and resist the changes introduced through the new hermeneutic. Only when all efforts at reformation by admonition and discipline proved ineffectual, and the floodgates of error were opened too wide ever to be shut again by ordinary means, did the faithful avail themselves of the last resort, which was to separate and reform the church according to its original character.

The United Reformed Churches are called by God to contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints; to be a pillar and buttress of the truth. May it please our Lord to give us an undying love for Jesus Christ, one in which we remain true to the Word and fulfill our calling so that "the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities" (*Belgic Confession*, Article 30).