

CREEDS AND REFORMATION IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

The beginning of the reformation in the Netherlands does not have a single person or single event in the life of a person as its focus as does the beginning of the reformation in Germany, Switzerland or Scotland. In Germany the publication of Luther's 95 theses is inseparably connected with the beginning of the reformation in that country and Luther is the central figure. In Switzerland Zwingli and Calvin are the main figures and the public disputations between Zwingli and Faber in 1523, along with the publication of the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* in 1536 are the significant events.

This has been recognized by others. De Jong says:

The rise of Protestantism in the Netherlands distinguishes itself in several respects from that in neighboring lands. Here was no outstanding leader to rally the people around his standard. Much less do we find the Reformation inaugurated or encouraged by political authorities. Instead it developed gradually among the masses who listened to the teaching and preaching of individuals dissatisfied with conditions in the church.¹

Because there was no central figure in the early years of the Dutch reformation it is difficult to pick out any one date that is of the same significance as the 1517 publication of Luther's 95 Theses in Germany or the 1536 publication of Calvin's *Institutes* in Switzerland. If there is any date that is important in the early history of the reformation in the Netherlands, it is the year 1566. In that year the Confession of Faith of Guido de Bres, also known as the Belgic or Netherlands Confession of Faith, was adopted by the Synod of Antwerp. In that same year Peter Datheen translated the Heidelberg Catechism into the Dutch language. In that year we first hear of sermons preached from the Heidelberg Catechism. These are things that shaped the character

of the reformation in the Netherlands and made the Dutch Reformed churches what they are today.

If 1566 is indeed the most important date in the Dutch Reformation, then it is striking that the focus is not on a man or on the deeds of any person, but on two creeds which remain even today the creeds of those churches that trace their spiritual origins to the Reformation in the Netherlands. The events of that year remind us that the Dutch Reformation was and is eminently creedal.

Few other churches have three main creeds of the kind and variety of those used in the Dutch Reformed churches. Few put such emphasis on creeds as do these churches. Fewer use their creeds as extensively in catechizing and instruction of converts. None but the Dutch Reformed have the practice of regularly preaching from their creeds.

In examining the relation between creeds and reformation in sixteenth century Netherlands, there are, then, three things that shaped the Reformation there; first, the early popularity of the Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism in the Netherlands; second, the use of those creeds in the Dutch Reformed churches, especially in preaching; and third, the introduction of the practice of subscription to these creeds and later to the Canons of Dordt in the Dutch churches. These things determined the course Reformation in the Netherlands and gave to the Reformed churches their unique character.

The Creeds of the Dutch Reformation

The Confession of Faith is the first Dutch creed and remained the only official creed of the Dutch churches for over fifty years. Written in 1559 by Guido de Bres, a pastor in the French-speaking churches of the Lowlands, as a personal statement of faith, it was quickly recognized for its doctrinal completeness, its clarity and its warmth. That it would therefore

serve the needs of the churches was also immediately recognized. And so in 1566, seven years after being written, the Confession of Faith was adopted at Antwerp “that the good Christians of the Reformed Church should not be driven about by every wind of doctrine, as had hitherto been too much the case.”²

At the time of its adoption it was thoroughly revised and some important changes were made including the shortening of the sixteenth article on election. It was signed by many of those present including many nobles, though it is not clear that the ministers present were required to sign it. It was sent to Geneva for printing and became the principle creed of the Dutch churches until the Synod of Dordt when the Heidelberg Catechism was officially adopted and the Canons of Dordt written.

The Heidelberg Catechism, first published in Germany in 1563 was also quickly recognized as a clear, useful and deeply devotional statement of the Reformed faith, and though it was not officially adopted by the Dutch churches until the great Synod of Dordt in 1618-19, it came into wide use in those churches in 1566 when it was translated from German to Dutch. The author of this translation of the Catechism, Peter Datheen, is better known for compiling the original Dutch Psalter, but ought to be remembered for this noble deed as well.

It was these creeds that took in the Netherlands the place of Luther in Germany and of Zwingli and Calvin in Geneva and which shaped the formation of the Dutch Reformed churches as churches whose outstanding characteristic is a close attachment to their creeds. These creeds provided a basis for unity which was especially important in the absence of any one notable leader. They insured competent instruction in the Reformed faith where there was at first no Protestant magistracy to insist on such instruction. Without them, it is difficult to see that the Reformation in the Netherlands could have prospered.

The Preaching the Heidelberg Catechism

Without doubt the practice of preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism has shaped and molded those churches from their beginnings. Interestingly, it is in 1566 that we first hear of this practice. Jansen says: “Already in 1566 the well-known preacher Peter Gabriel preached each Sunday from the Heidelberg Catechism.”³ The matter came up in different ways at subsequent Synods, but did not become official practice until 1586, when the Synod of s’Gravenhage adopted the following article, now encapsulated in the present Article 68 of the Church Order of the Dutch Reformed Churches:

The ministers everywhere shall on Sundays, ordinarily in the afternoon sermon, preach the sum of the Christian religion, in the Catechism, which is at present accepted in the Dutch Churches, so that the same may be finished annually, according to the divisions of the Catechism itself, made for this purpose.⁴

This practice seems very strange and even unbiblical to those who are not accustomed to it, but it is supposed to have been introduced from other countries and is not unknown elsewhere. Thomas Watson’s *Body of Divinity*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Lord’s Prayer* (reprinted by the Banner of Truth in 1958-1960) are sermons on the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Nevertheless, it was only in the Netherlands that preaching from a catechism became first the practice and then the rule of the churches.

Whether one likes the practice or not, it must be evident that regular preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism insured that the members of the Dutch Reformed churches were well taught and grounded in all the principle doctrines of the Reformed faith. This, along with regular catechizing both of children and of new converts insured the stability and strength of those

churches for many years to come and continues to do so in those churches that have not abandoned the practice.

Subscription to the Creeds

Another important practice, introduced very early in the Dutch Reformed Churches, was that of subscription to the creeds, that is, the formal signing of agreement with the creeds by those who are officebearers, professors, ministers, elders, and deacons in the churches. In that way, doctrinal purity was and is maintained, and in the way of doctrinal purity, also unity among the churches.

While there was in the beginning no Formula of Subscription such as was adopted by the National Synod of Dordt in 1618-19, and is still in use in the Reformed churches, the practice is nevertheless very old. As early as 1568 at the Convent of Wezel, candidates for the ministry were required to declare their agreement with the Confession of Faith and the Catechism:

Furthermore, he shall be asked whether he is in complete agreement with the doctrine which is publicly maintained in the church and in accord with the confession of faith first presented to the King of France by the ministers of the churches in that kingdom, and after being translated into our language, was dedicated and presented to the king of Spain and the rest of the government officials of Nether-Germany, and finally also contained in the Catechism.⁵

And in 1571 at the Synod Emden, written subscription to the Confession of Faith, and, interestingly, to the French Confessions, was made obligatory on all the ministers of the gospel and elders of the churches:

In order to demonstrate the unity in doctrine among the Netherlands churches, the brethren thought it well to subscribe to the confession of faith of the Netherlands churches, likewise to subscribe to the confessions of the churches in France, in order thereby to attest their agreement and unity with these French churches, surely trusting that the ministers of these French churches also on their part will subscribe to the confession of faith of the Netherlands churches, giving testimony of their mutual unity.⁶

Conclusion

In all these ways, the writing, adoption, and use of creeds had a profound influence on the development of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, an influence that was both good and lasting. It is sad that so few seem to see this today and have so little use for the Creeds of the Dutch Reformation or for any creeds. Because the Dutch churches were from the beginning creedal churches, what was true of the early church in Acts 9:31, was also true of these churches for many years: “Then had the churches rest ... and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.” For those churches the options were indeed “creed or chaos,”⁷ as they are also today.

Endnotes

1. Peter Y. De Jong, ed., *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), p. 5.
2. Quoted from Maurice G. Hansen, *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands. Traced from A.D. 1340 to A.D. 1840, in Short Historical Sketches* (New York: Board of Publications of the Reformed Church in America: 1884), pp. 57, 58.
3. Joh, Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1923), p. 294 (author's translation from the Dutch).
4. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring*, p. 295 (author's translation from the Dutch).
5. P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual* (trans. Richard de Ridder), (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), p. 24.
6. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 43.
7. The title of a book of essays by Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Harcourt, 1949).